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THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER . . .

ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS, delving with a gnomelike pertinacity into man's buried past on Earth, have brought to light in recent years the most astounding of primitive archetypes. An archetype is, of course, the original structure, symbolic or otherwise, upon which an historic legend has been built—or a biological synthesis, or even an original manuscript from which innumerable later copies have been made. But the particular archetype which we've decided to discuss audaciously for a moment here is far more awesome and universal than the central and proved historical fact that most men have ten fingers and ten toes.

Perhaps we can best introduce "him" by paraphrasing a few lines from Baudelaire. The original lines run as follows: "There's one the wickedest, ugliest of all. 'Tis Boredom! Lost in some wild dream or other, he smokes his pipe and makes but little pother. But well *you* know that dainty monster, thou, hypocrite reader, fellow man, my brother!" Our paraphrase would read: "There's one the ugliest, wickedest of all. 'Tis the Horned God! He blows on his pipe and makes but little pother."

Yes, good friends. The Horned God is the most ancient and terrifying of all, and if the Jungian hypothesis has any validity you've met him often in your dreams. Modern man quite inexcusably refers to him as "the Devil." But he isn't really. He's far more primitive and universal and he goes back to the dim beginnings of human life on Earth.

You'll find him in Aurignacian cave paintings, wearing the horned head-dress of an animal, and blowing on a reedlike pipe as he capers about in red ochre. He is the rustic Pan of the Greeks, and the dreadful Teutonic forest deity whose very breath could slay. He is even the feared and hated Robin Goodfellow of medieval legend, whose later glorification as Robin Hood gratuitously stripped away his horns.

Did the Horned God ever actually walk the Earth? Well—we suggest you study carefully this month's chillingly imaginative cover illustration. Here we see not only a horned man, but a horned woman! The artist assures us he has depicted as faithfully as possible the inhabitants of another planet. This we do not doubt. But what if in some age immeasurably remote a spaceship from the stars brought to our planet —the Horned God in the flesh!

The devil, you say! Well—

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

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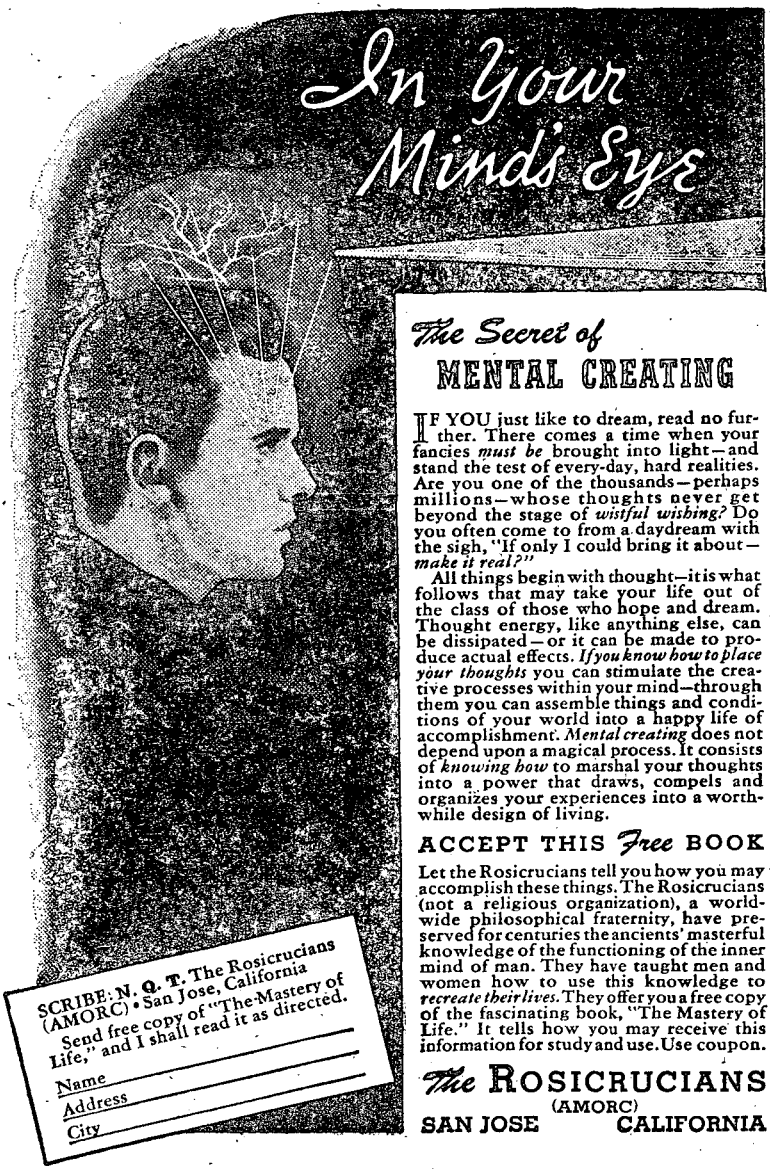

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IF YOU just like to dream, read no further. There comes a time when your fancies *must be* brought into light—and stand the test of every-day, hard realities. Are you one of the thousands—perhaps millions—whose thoughts never get beyond the stage of *wistful wishing?* Do you often come to from a daydream with the sigh, "If only I could bring it about—*make it real?*"

All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worthwhile design of living.

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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Have You Met THE saint

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE'S Famous Crime Companion

▷ We believe it was Rudyard Kipling who once wrote, "The fields of fantasy are very wide," and so, we might add, are the closely related realms of science fiction and detective fiction. Each presents a challenge to the imagination, an invitation to leave the world of the humdrum and the commonplace, and fare boldly forth in search of the beckoning pot of gold at the crest of imagination's rainbow. And we feel that Leslie Charteris stands well in the forefront as an undaunted and ebulliently ingenious guide in such a valiant undertaking.

▷ To our way of thinking THE SAINT DETECTIVE MAGAZINE is a natural. Certainly there is no more widely known and beloved character in present-day mystery fiction than Simon Templar, alias The Saint. And certainly there is no man alive more uniquely equipped to serve in a supervisory capacity on a mystery magazine than Simon's creator.

▷ Currently a resident of Florida, when not engaged in traveling as the spirit moves him, Charteris has seen himself, wearing the guise of debonair Simon Templar, appear in scores of books and hundreds of magazines, in dozens of movies, on the radio and currently in a hugely-syndicated comic strip.

▷ Make no mistake, Charteris and The Saint are oddly interchangeable—for like Simon, his author is casual and languid and manages to look like a Louis Quinze courtier even in huaraches and Bermuda shorts. It seems probable that Simon is actually the person Charteris sees when he looks in the shaving mirror. Apart from the two-in-one phase of his existence Charteris is an editor of shrewd and unerring taste. A sampling of the current issue—with a new yarn by Rufus King and stories by Leslie Charteris, Somerset Maugham, Thomas Walsh, Lawrence G. Blochman, Leslie Ford, William MacHarg—will attest to that.

▷ We should like very much to add you to the hundreds of thousands of mystery-loving readers, from New York to Sydney, from Paris to the ports of Mars, who in recent years have become The Saint's avowed partisans.

KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, Inc.
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star-flight

by . . . Sam Merwin Jr.

In mind and heart Fran was a woman grown—but her body was that of a child. Who could have foreseen the glory of her destiny?

THERE WERE no cracks in the ceiling of Francesca Hawley-Bey's spacious dormitory cell. The sturdy flexibility of its reddish Martian desert-sand-plastic structure forbade cracking. But there were the familiar shadows cast by slight irregularities in its curved expanse, and she lay flat on her back on her sleeping-oval, abstractedly studying them.

She wondered what had happened to the sense of power, of destiny, that had lain only half-dormant behind her routine conscious thoughts from her early childhood until her matriculation, one Mars-year earlier, at Newsorbonne. At home, coupled with the love and understanding of her parents, brothers and neighbors, in the compact little world of the ICA (Industrial - Cultural - Agricultural) complex, it had buoyed her consistently against the slowness of her physical growth.

"You are Francesca," it had told her. "You are capable of any accomplishment you may choose to set your mind to."

Under the impact of social failure and loneliness and, more im-

There is a liveliness, a sophistication, and a sparkling humor in Sam Merwin's best science fiction stories which the pocket book publishers have been quick to recognize, and he has acquired an enviable renown in that field. He is by no means a newcomer to our pages, but seldom has he written quite such a brilliantly perceptive and imaginatively appealing interplanetary novelette as this, with its life-size portrait of the most unusual woman you'll ever meet.

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portant, the feeling that she didn't count at all with anyone, the sense of power had withered and died. At the moment Francesca felt that she had died with it.

Although she was thirteen Mars-years old—twenty-three-and-a-half Earth-years—she still looked like a little girl. And that was why—although she was bright enough in her studies—her parents had kept her at home for so long.

"They should have drowned me in the canal at birth!" she told herself bitterly, wondering if she were ever going to grow up and begin living, like the other girls in the dormitory around her, without bitterness and without fear.

Outside, the entire university was athrob with excitement on this cold bright Martian day. Just an hour earlier, the entire faculty and student body had turned out en masse to greet Dr. Colin Franz, generally accepted as the Solar System's greatest living scientific genius, on his first visit to Newsorbonne. Here he was to remain, for a series of conferences and panel meetings with Martian scientists during a festive fortnight, to be climaxed by the bestowal of the highest honor the University could convey—that of Doctor of Martian Metaphysics.

Everyone had attended the ceremonies—except the infirmary inmates and Francesca Hawley-Bey. Increasingly, in creating a cocoon of anonymity to shield her social failure, Francesca had taken to avoiding public gatherings of all kinds.

Dr. Franz had been one of her childhood heroes, of course. But she preferred the sanctuary of her cell to risking public notice as either a freak or a prodigy. For she was neither—she was merely a young woman wearing a little girl's body.

There was a flicker of light from her communicator and she sat up to answer it, wondering who could want to talk to her in her loneliness and isolation. She hoped it wasn't bad news from home—or, worse, word that her parents were coming to see her. For them to have to witness the fullness of her failure would have been the most unendurable of all possible nightmares.

But, when she switched on two-way, an impersonal voice said, "Hawley-Bey?" And, at her affirmative, "You are requested to report at once to Dean Ybarra's office."

Adjusting her clout and bolo, and giving her straight tawny hair a pat with the pneumatic comb, Francesca battled panic that clutched at her knees, her throat, her diaphragm. Never before had she been summoned by the dean. It could only be, she decided, the Bio-Gen term-test final. She had taken the examination casually, doing little preparation, and taping her answers as fast as she could talk. It had not occurred to her, before or since, that anything could

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have gone wrong. But apparently her optimism had been unwarranted.

She wished she had never come to the university at all. She wished that she had remained on the ICA complex, 9,000 kilometers away, where she had been born, surrounded by her family and friends who loved and understood her. The Industrial - Cultural - Agricultural complex was a typical self-contained Martian agrarian community. Hard-working, homely, human—and above all, happy—were the adjectives which came instantly to her mind when she remembered what life had been like on the complex.

Thanks to the expense of traveling and the fact that her parents were chained to their hard-won fields by the exacting demands of the farming profession, Francesca had seen neither her loved ones nor her home for two whole terms at Newsorbonne—almost a full Martian year.

Riding the moving strip to the Administration Building across the spacious and brilliant university campus, she felt overwhelmingly homesick. Yet she had no desire to be sent home in disgrace before her third and final term, since such a reprieve from her misery would have been a cruel blow to her parents . . .

Dean Ybarra's desk was a wafer-thin slab of diamond-hard desert wood that jutted out from the wedge-shaped room's one solid wall. Its only ornaments were a communicator, a crystal stylus and a sonic telereader.

At his back, as he regarded her from the sitting-oval behind it, was a curving picture window, which embraced in its bright circumference a magnificent panoramic view of the vermillion and turquoise towers of the university, each rising from the flat, ruddy soil like a gigantic upended dragonfly with furled wings.

The third wall was a solid bank of vidar-screens, all of them blank at the moment.

Dr. Ybarra asked politely: "Miss Hawley-Bey?" and, when she nodded, motioned her to a sitting-oval on the near side of the desk. His dusky, sensitive comeliness was, she thought, even more striking in closeup than when seen on a visi-screen or from far back in a crowded lecture hall.

He regarded her intently, his brows arching in amazement as if he could not quite believe she was real. Then he said, "There's something I should very much like to discuss with you."

Fear was clutching at her all over now. But somehow she managed to reply, her voice unsteady, "I know. It's that last Bio-Gen final. I'm afraid I didn't *study* for it."

His thick black eyebrows rose a centimeter higher. "If you didn't, Miss Hawley-Bey, you must have discovered a new process of learning. Your tape was so close to perfect the department had to look

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for loopholes to downgrade you a fraction or two. As you know, it's against university policy to give perfect grades outside of non-theoretical mathematics."

Then what had he summoned her for, she wondered, her breath catching in her throat.

He hesitated, then said, "Dr. Franz wants to talk to you."

She couldn't believe it. "Dr. Franz wants to talk to *me?*" Then, as her suspicion mounted, she demanded: "What for?" She had no intention of being put on record as any sort of a freak.

"I'm afraid he'll have to tell you that himself," said the dean. "Since you are enrolled in my department, it was simply my obligation to summon you. That obligation I have now fulfilled."

"But how did Dr. Franz ever hear of me?" she asked, still incredulous, still suspicious.

"I'm afraid only Dr. Franz can tell you that," was the dean's reply.

II

DR. FRANZ was gazing out the window of the big inner office when she was ushered into his presence. He was even taller than Francesca's conception of him—taller, more powerful and somehow younger, though he was actually far from a young man. He said, without turning as she approached him, "They were wise to use color as they have at this university. The total effect is not only one of cohesion. It gives each building an individuality of its own."

As he spoke he swung about to look down at her with unexpectedly bright blue eyes. He said, "Tell me, what do you know about John Franklin?"

So unanticipated was the question that, for a long moment, Francesca had almost literally to chase her suddenly fugitive thoughts about the room. Finally regrouping them into a semblance of mental order, she said:

"Not very much, sir—except that he is supposed to be a remote ancestor of mine on both sides of my family. I believe he was a famous organic scientist of the pre-Einsteinian era."

"You mean you *know* he was," Dr. Franz said. And from the warmth and friendliness of his smile, she derived a distinct impression that this very great man—perhaps the greatest of the entire Solar System—was not talking down to her. She felt her fear and diffidence dissolve.

"All right," she said, "I *know* he was. But just what has John Franklin to do with me?"

He studied her in silence for a full minute, his hands behind his back. "I suppose you detest the fact you're taking an uncommonly long time growing up physically," he said at last.

She should have been furious—yet, curiously enough, she wasn't at all. Despite his bluntness, Dr.

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Franz' manner was neither insulting nor intrusive.

She blurted out, with a vehemence which startled her, "It's horrible."

A smile touched Dr. Franz's strong, mobile mouth. He said, "Has it ever occurred to you that you should be grateful? Have you considered the possibility that what seems to you arrested development may be perfectly normal for a person destined to live far longer than the hundred years of the average human life span on Mars?"

She had to sit down, so utterly unexpected was the idea. For an instant it took her breath away. Then, perversely, she heard herself saying, "But what has my arrested development to do with John Franklin?"

"Possibly everything," Dr. Franz said. "You see, John Franklin was not merely a great scientist for his time. He was also one of the longest-lived. Officially, he died at the age of a hundred fifty-three—and there are some misguided individuals who claim he is not dead yet."

"You mean"—again she struggled to keep her voice from faltering—"that I'm a sort of Mendellian throwback to John Franklin?"

"It's a definite possibility," he told her.

"And you came all the way to Mars—to Newsorbonne—just to look me up?" she asked.

He smiled again at her disbelief. "Let's say I wanted to see Mars," he told her, "and there was the little matter of this degree they're awarding me. However, essentially, I came to see you."

"But how did you know of me?" she asked.

He dropped into a sitting-oval opposite her, and lit a cigarette with muscular brown fingers. He said, "My associates and I have been tracing the descendants of John Franklin throughout the Solar System for years. Why shouldn't we know of you, a *double* descendant?"

"There's no reason, I suppose," she said. "But why?"

"Before I answer that, Francesca," he replied, using her name for the first time, "I must ask you to pledge yourself to absolute secrecy."

She said, with a flash of bitterness, "Even if I wanted to talk, who would listen to me?"

"Bad as that, eh?" he said regarding her with sympathy.

She thought, *I like this man, even if he is famous!*

"What is the most important scientific project now under way in the Solar System?" he asked abruptly, as if pleased by the candor in her eyes.

She thought a moment, then replied promptly, "The development of Titan and the major Saturnian moons for colonization."

He shook his head. "A mere stopgap," he said. "Expensive, dangerous, and profitless. Even if the Saturnian moons are opened up,

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they are certain to suffer, in the course of two or three generations, as greatly from depletion and overpopulation as Mars, or Earth itself. No, Francesca, some of us have been looking a lot further . . ." He paused.

"You mean—star-drive?" she asked, wonderingly. "But I thought—"

"You thought it was far beyond our reach," he told her. "Well, until very recently, it has been. The speeds demanded to make it practical have presented almost insurmountable problems. But believe me, we're getting close."

Emotions profoundly stirring took hold of Francesca at the thought of humanity, so long bound to one planet and so recently spreading to its neighbors, sweeping the vast and glittering expanses of the galaxy. She said, "Why has it been kept a secret for so long?"

Dr. Franz rose again and paced the floor. He said, "We had to keep it a secret. The increased imminence of crowding populations have caused planetary isolationism to rear its ugly head again—chiefly on Earth. Certain powerful groups have become so haunted by the spectre of Malthusian starvation that they can conceive of star-travel only as a means of enrichment through exploitation. They are seeking to make a planetary monopoly of it."

He stood in front of her, looking down at her. "The narrow path they have chosen," he went on, "is the path of planetary destruction. In the long run it can only invite war and utter disaster. Yet star-travel can lead to the ultimate liberation of man. It will give him not only a world, but a universe in which to achieve maturity. It will enrich him immeasurably, on a scale undreamt of by the ancient Spaniards who brought wealth to the Old World from the Americas. Contact with hundreds—perhaps thousands—of habitable alien worlds will enlarge his horizons of thought and tolerance beyond all previous comprehension."

He regarded her gently, with a sardonic half-smile. "The element of irony in this effort to make a monopoly out of what should belong to mankind as a whole is that its promoters, while they may succeed in solving the scientific problems confronting them, have not yet faced honestly what may prove the most difficult problem of all—the ability of any man or woman now living to make the journey. Do you understand, young lady?"

"Oh . . ." she said. She thought about it for a moment. "You mean the time element?"

"Exactly," Dr. Franz replied. "Even at light-speed—which has not yet been attained under laboratory conditions—it's a four-year journey to Proxima Centauri. And Proxima Centauri is only the nearest of the stars. Should we someday surpass the speed of light—which is not now improbable—it will take years, perhaps decades,

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to reach even relatively neighboring stars whose systems *must* be explored—if star-travel is to realize its potentialities."

The implication sank home. "Then you think that I"—her voice sounded very small and far away—"may be capable of living long enough."

He looked at her with vast understanding and sympathy. "That," he told her, "is one of the things I came to Mars to find out. Untested, you are still our most promising discovery to date. You combine what appears, from your record, to be a most unusual longevity potential with a quick, intuitive mind."

"But I'm such a *drip!*" she protested out of the depths of her soul. "I'm afraid of people."

He rose and helped her out of the sitting-oval and placed his huge, gentle hands on her shoulders. He said, "Francesca, remember—you haven't grown up yet. And that, in a way, makes my own responsibility the greater."

"I'm mature in years," she replied quickly, afraid of disappointing this great man who had come so unexpectedly into her life.

"I know you are," he told her, letting his hands fall away from her shoulders. "But that's not the branch of the problem I'm considering. Remember, what I have just told you about star-travel and conditions on Earth must remain secret. Even on my own planet, only a very few people know the truth. If it were even suspected that I told anyone on Mars . . ." He paused, shrugged his shoulders and added, "It could mean my freedom, even my life. Already I am under suspicion for refusing to cooperate in their monopolistic schemes.

"But for the moment I am considering you, not myself," he went on. "Suppose the tests I hope to give you prove that your life-span is greater than normal. The confirmation cannot be kept a secret—not with man's age-old yearning for immortality. Consider what it would mean to you. From that moment on, you would be living in a glass cage, watched, studied, spied upon, an object of hope and fear and envy for fifty billion people on Earth, Venus and Mars. You will be abandoning all right to call your life your own. You will become a project." He walked to the window and back, his face somber. "Are you willing to become a project?"

She understood—or thought she understood—what Dr. Franz meant. Much of it was certain to be hateful, unbearable—if she passed the tests successfully. Yet there would be compensations. She would no longer need to be ashamed of her slow development. Rather, it would be a source of immense pride.

And, balanced against her sense of uselessness, would be the feeling of importance, not only to herself but to all of humanity. And,

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in the background, would be always the sustaining thought that not mere longevity but the road to the stars was her real aim.

She said quietly, "I am willing, Dr. Franz."

III

THE TWO weeks that followed passed with a swiftness undreamed of to Francesca. Never, since she had contracted polar-pox as an infant on the complex, had she been so fussed over, so attended, so *special*. Sometimes with Dr. Franz, sometimes with Dean Ybarra, and occasionally with lesser scientists she was given rigorous daily tests.

First her cell structure was studied, her metabolism, her muscular and neural tone and development. Then her glands came under scrutiny, her brain, her reproductive processes. She was given exhaustive and exhausting physical tests, for both reaction-timing and endurance.

Dr. Franz himself put her at least a dozen times under hypnosis for thorough psychiatric examination. Even when she slept she was a guinea pig, with injections silently at work within her and various meters strapped to her limbs.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it was all over and Dean Ybarra, his dark eyes alert with interest, was telling her:

"We want you to go home for a rest—until we've had time to evaluate the results of these tests. Since you've become in a way a university project, I've arranged an indefinite leave of absence and Newsorbonne is paying your expenses. You'll receive notification as soon as the results have been correlated. You've earned a vacation—so enjoy it. I only wish I could share it with you."

It was, she thought as she packed at the dorm, an odd thing for the dean to have said to her. Why should he want to share a vacation with her? He had been friendly, true, and he was charming—perhaps too charming, since rumor had it that he was target number-one for all of the unattached university females. But why had he singled her out? Until two weeks earlier, he had not even known she was alive.

She decided Dean Ybarra was merely being polite and continued resolutely with her packing. Curiously enough, now that her life at the university had assumed a purpose it had conspicuously lacked before, she actually hated to leave. She even felt resentful about it.

Yet, when she alighted from the transplanet-ship at Rimballa Station, after the long six-hour, 9,000-kilometer flight from Newsorbonne, and saw the familiar, rather battered air-car awaiting her with her father's grizzled, kindly figure beside it, she was unable to restrain her emotion. An all-engulfing wave of security swept over her as they embraced.

He said, gently, "Mother's wait-

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ing in the car. She was afraid she'd make an idiot of herself out here."

And Francesca wondered how much they knew. But it was not until they were safely in the air, for the short 200-kilometer run to the complex, that she said, "What have they told you about me?"

"Oh, just that Dr. Franz has tested you," replied her father. "We simply can't realize that it may be you. But we should have realized —your slow growth and everything."

"We'd hoped, of course," her mother put in. "But it just didn't seem possible. You see, darling, we *know*. And now that it's happened, we both wish it had been someone else's child. You won't be our baby any more—you'll belong to everybody."

"Hold the ovibos," said Francesca. "Just how long has this conspiracy been going on?"

Her parents looked at one another and her mother looked away, sobbing quietly. It was her father who said, "It began a long, long time ago—before our families came to Mars. We were marked for marriage almost before we were born. The known descendants of John Franklin . . ."

Francesca felt as if one of the angora goats on the ICA complex had butted her in the solar plexus. She looked at her parents and read in their eyes that it was true.

"Then you and daddy," she said to her mother, "planned it all along. You had it planned *for* you. But I don't . . ."

Recalling the casual good nature of her parents with each other, their obvious mutual affection, all the little kindnesses and tolerances that had gone into their life together, she couldn't believe it. Her father, apparently reading her thoughts, placed an arm about her shoulder, and drew her close within its circle.

He said, "Little Mouse, it's not as bad as all that. Your mother and I would have fallen in love under any circumstances. As a matter of fact, I believe it helped us fall in love. It gave us something special to live for." He straightened proudly. "We gave ourselves gladly to the cause of learning—or helping others learn—a little more about increasing the life-span. Of course there was no question of star-travel then."

"My poor little girl!" said Francesca's mother, her weathered face crinkling. "What's going to happen to you?"

Francesca pulled herself free of her father's clasp. She managed to smile. She said, "Cheer up, people, the final results aren't in yet. I may not outlive Methusaleh. I very much fear I may not be able to outlive anybody."

She was outwardly cheerful, but in her secret thoughts were grave doubts, reawakened suspicions. If the experiments in human biology of which she was the result had been going on for centuries—

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which she accepted without question—why all the secrecy? Surely they could not have been conducted merely to increase the human life-span which already had been expanded past the century-mark.

Now that she was out of the intense, definitive atmosphere of the Bio-Gen department of Newsorbonne, there were a number of things she could no longer take for granted. Her parents had submitted cheerfully to an arranged marriage with the idea in mind that they were—or might be—helping humanity conquer longevity. But she alone had been trapped by the lure of being a pioneer star-flier.

She wondered how close Solar Science was to actual star-flight—even if it were close at all. Yet she had given her vow of secrecy to Dr. Franz as to the actual nature of the tests she had undergone.

What price secrecy?

She observed with delight the recently erected plastic houses enlarging the ICA complex, and stared in wonder at the newly reclaimed desert land and the increased amount of water in the once-dead canal. She was happy to be home, to be freed from the tensions and lonelinesses of the university.

Yet doubt and suspicion still gnawed at her.

Her brother, Flicker, offered a diversion. He was waiting at the airfield, taller, stockier, and far more grown up than he had been on the day of her departure for the university. He waved a greeting and then, the instant they were within earshot, called out: "Welcome home, Sis! I never thought they'd be making all this fuss over a girl, and my sister at that!"

She ruffled his tow head and said, "Hello, darling. I've brought you a new Mars-ball mallet—one of the new ones with a spun-sand head."

"You did?" said Flicker. "That's wonderful. Where is it?"

"You wait till she gets unpacked," warned her father. "And watch your language, too."

Her mother helped her put her things away. "I worried so much about your going to the university, dear," she said. "I was afraid you'd have a hard time fitting in—because you still look so very young. But now I know your father was right. We're both very proud of you. You seem so—so grown up."

Francesca was so surprised at this comment that she almost dropped the bolo-and-clout she was putting in the clothes-keeper. She said, "Do I really, mother?"

And her mother, close to tears again, nodded with lips tightly compressed. Finally she said, "It's in the way you carry yourself. Your poise—your assurance. I've missed you terribly, my dearest, but I guess it's been worth it."

Francesca became thoughtful. The metamorphosis, if it actually was one, had come in the past two weeks. But she did feel a flood of new confidence, along with a nos-

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talgic sadness for a rather nice little girl gone forever.

IV

THAT evening, tall Victor Fauré-Olssen came over from the other side of the complex in his red air-hopper to call on her and, ultimately, to ask her to go to the mid-season hop with him three nights hence. Just one Mars-year ago, Francesca would have been thrilled. But now, neither Victor nor the invitation excited her. He seemed uncommonly slow of wit and tongue and, while the dance promised to be fun in its way, it hardly loomed as an event.

Nevertheless, she told him she'd love to go and permitted him to kiss her good-night. *My first kiss,* she thought, *and I might as well be playing Mars-ball for all the thrill it gives me.* She hoped something would happen to her some day that would live up to its advance billing.

Notification of the results of her tests reached her two days after her arrival home. Stunningly, she learned that she had shown subnormal hard-radiation resistance, and was therefore no longer to consider herself a likely candidate for longevity. Strangely, once she had digested this news, she realized that it came as no surprise. Subconsciously, she had been ready for it. What did surprise her was that Dean Ybarra brought it in person.

"I wanted to break it to you myself," he told her, looking strangely cosmopolitan in the simple rurality of the Hawley-Bey living-kitchen. "After all, I feel partly responsible. It must be an awful letdown."

Francesca thought that over for a full minute before replying. "It *is* a letdown, of course," she said, at last. "I won't try to deny that I liked the attention I got after two terms of neglect. But in a way, it's a relief, too. After all, being a new Methuselah isn't exactly a bed of polar lichens to look forward to."

She wondered at her ability to lie—for she was lying with a purpose and subtlety hitherto unknown to her. Whatever Dr. Franz had done to her under hypnotics, he had done well and thoroughly. That he had done something was evident in her reaction to news of her "failure." She supposed she ought to be worried about that—but somehow she wasn't.

"But it was sweet of you to come all the way out here to tell me," she said.

"It was the least I could do." He stared down for an instant at his scuffed san-pacs. Then he raised his eyes and regarded her steadily. "You must know by now that I'm fascinated by you, Francesca."

"Syrtis!" said Francesca, honestly surprised. She remembered again that Dean Ybarra was one of the major catches of the university. Not only was he reputed to have all sorts of lovely co-eds dancing about

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him, but—if rumor were true—faculty wives as well.

He smiled ruefully, with a little boy's candor, and said, "There's something about that amazing adult mind of yours locked in a lovely child's body that is like nothing I have ever known—or even imagined."

"Watch yourself, Dr. Ybarra," she told him lightly. "They'll be giving you a workout in the psycho-labs unless you're careful. Are you sure you don't want to be a mother to me?"

She could have bitten her tongue out. Dean Ybarra was far and away the most attractive young man she had ever known, however briefly. She liked the distinguished contours of his handsome face, the easy style with which he wore his clothes, and the large luminous eyes that met hers so admiringly. She wondered what it would be like to be kissed by him.

An alarm bell rang within her. This, she reminded herself, was no time to be falling in love. Besides, she didn't even know Dean Ybarra's first name. It proved to be Li-sun—and it took little urging from her parents to persuade him to stay overnight.

That evening, in the long, pale-yellow twilight, she showed him around the complex on Flicker's air-scooter. Proudly, she displayed the warehouses full of dehydrated foods, the musk oxen, the angora sheep, the tame boars, the long-feathered poultry, and the irrigated pastures in the atomically-heated and watered soil.

When they got back, and were approaching the house with its cheerful lights, he took her into his arms as if she were a doll and looked down at her and whispered softly, under the brilliant Martian starlight, "I hope what I'm going to do isn't going to make you hate me."

And, while she was singing with excitement and anticipation like a high-tension cable, she heard herself laugh softly and say, "It won't—it couldn't."

His kiss set her whole body aflame. She knew, rapturously, that the last trace of the little girl that had plagued her for so long had vanished forever. For no little girl could have felt as she did in his arms.

Not until much later, when she was alone in her own cell on her own rest-oval, did the warning voice within her make itself heard again with an admonition—not a demand—that she should hold her emotions in tight rein.

Into the darkness, Francesca whispered, "*Now* you tell me. I'm respectfully and hopefully afraid you're just a little too late."

The following morning, after breakfast, Li-sun Ybarra said, "I'd like to take a look at the atomic installations, Fran. Remember—this is my first visit to a complex. While I know all about the soil transmuters in theory, I have never seen one of them in actual use."

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Francesca regarded him doubtfully. She said, "I don't know whether we should. No one's supposed to go inside unless he's a member of the Atomic Commission."

"But I'm an honorary member," said the dean, pulling out his pasto-identifier and showing her a punched metaltape. "Besides, I'm safe enough. I've been working around atomic labs most of my adult life."

"Okay, then," she said, a trifle doubtfully. "I guess it will be all right. But please be careful."

When they reached the squat little group of thick concrete buildings housing the atomic power plant which kept the complex alive, Li-sun dropped his AC card in the robot-watcher and waited for the heavy, lead-lined steel door to swing open. Then he led the way inside.

After making a thorough inspection of the installations, he said to Francesca, "You wait here in the main hall, honey. I'd like to take a look at the power-chamber itself."

"Be careful, darling," she said in routine warning. She waited, idly, for him to reappear.

Then, suddenly, she heard him cry, "Fran, I'm afraid I pushed the wrong lever. The red lights are on!"

Thanks to the emotional excitement under which she was laboring, Francesca reacted without thought. All that surged through her was the knowledge that, somehow, Li-sun Ybarra had trapped himself in the power-plant itself and accidentally released the insulating shield. Nor was he wearing the shielding garments which were customarily donned as an additional safeguard by visitors planning to enter the chamber.

To rescue him before he received serious, perhaps fatal, radiation burns it was necessary for her to pass through the opposite end of the hot-room and re-arm the shield from the emergency lever which had been installed there for just such occasions. She had less than five seconds to accomplish this, Earth-time.

She didn't stop to debate the wisdom of donning a shielding garment herself. For one thing, there wasn't time—not if the red lights had flashed. For another, she knew it wouldn't be necessary. She ran quickly around the bulk of the lead-and-graphite block, reached the corridor and pulled the emergency lever before she could count to four.

Then she leaned against the no longer dangerous wall of the chamber in a state of near-collapse. Somehow, she managed to call out to Li-sun and ask if he was all right. He replied, in an odd tone of voice, "Thanks, darling. I think I am."

A second later he appeared and put his arm around her and helped her out into the pale sunlight. From intuition, perhaps from the

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expression on his face, she knew what was coming.

"We'd better rush you to an infirmary," he said. "You didn't wear a shielding garment."

"There wasn't time, Li-sun," she said, simply. "There wasn't time. Are you sure *you're* all right?"

He stared straight ahead, and for a moment she thought she had deceived him. But doubt grew within her once more, when he said, "I'm not worried about myself. It's you I'm concerned about."

From some unsuspected inner source she drew the courage to meet his dark gaze. "There's no reason to be, is there?" she asked. "You never really turned off the shield!"

He opened his mouth to lie, but was unable to face her steady regard. Finally he just shook his head. They sat there on the cold ground —miserable, silent. It was possible, she supposed that he was feeling as betrayed as she was.

Finally he said, "I didn't know until just the other day that Dr. Franz has been suspect with the Solar System Institute for some time. A number of them seem to believe that he has been dragging his feet on star-drive."

"How can they feel that?" she asked indignantly, "when he has given so much of his time and energy to the project? Without his genius to guide them, what could they have accomplished?"

"They feel he opened the door a little, then slammed it in their faces," said the dean somberly.

"But why should he do that?" asked Francesca.

"Perhaps because he doesn't want to share the credit for what he feels is his own discovery," said Dr. Ybarra. "Or perhaps he doesn't think people are ready for it. Who knows? I didn't believe it myself until now."

"Then why did you come here to see me?" she asked him angrily. "Why didn't you merely send me my notification of failure?"

"Because, having been in on your tests from the very first, I didn't believe you had failed," was the reply. "Also—though you won't believe this—because I couldn't get out of my head and heart my admiration for you as a woman."

"Why did you have to deceive me?" she asked him. "Why didn't you come right out and ask me?"

"How could I?" he countered. "If I openly doubted the results of the tests without actual proof I—well, it was out of the question. Can't you see that?"

"I see a great many things," the girl told him bitterly. "Tell me, did you unshield the plant?"

He shook his head. "I could hardly have asked you to take such a risk just to satisfy my curiosity."

She got up, brushing off the rear of her clout. She said, carefully, evenly, "I suppose you take it for granted I risked radiation burns to save you because Dr. Franz' tests lied about my being too susceptible

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to hard radiation. What made you think that?"

"Dr. Franz made an Earthman's mistake," said Ybarra. "He forgot that the thin Martian atmosphere makes all of us natives show a higher resistance ratio to radiation. He made your figure too low, even for a subnormal Martian."

"I see." Francesca looked thoughtfully at nothing. "Well, now that you know, what are you planning to do about it? Will you talk to your precious Solar Institute heads and get yourself a more remunerative job?" At that moment, she detested him more than anyone she had ever known in her entire life.

"I don't-know," he said, miserably. "And if I did, I wonder if it would be safe to tell you."

"Keep right on wondering," she said. "And I'd like it very much if you caught the next ship back to Newsorbonne."

V

SHE WALKED back toward the house, leaving him standing there alone. And though her recently regained self-assurance had been dealt a cruel blow, her thoughts were not on herself.

She knew, of course, that Dr. Franz would have to be informed at once. Dr. Ybarra's discovery that her reported failure on the star-flight tests was actually a huge success could very well affect the entire plan.

Ybarra came striding after her, and what she had thought was sturdy masculine assurance now seemed like overgrown-puppy awkwardness. "What do you think I should do, Francesca?" he said.

And Francesca said, without looking around at him, "Why don't you jump in a canal? It would completely solve your problem."

It was a stupid, cruelly childish remark—and she was overcome with remorse the moment she had uttered it. But she was new to being a woman, and she had been bitterly disillusioned. She refused to look up when Ybarra seized her by the shoulders, and spun her around.

"What makes you so *sure* I'm not on your side?" he said. "Why are you so certain I'll go running to the authorities?"

"Put yourself in my place for a moment," she said, still refusing to look at him. "Why should I believe anything you say? Now, if you please . . . !"

She turned her back on him, and walked on toward the house alone. Li-sun Ybarra, looking grimly perplexed, followed her at a respectful distance. Since there was no ship leaving the airport for several hours, there was little either of them could do about the crisis that had estranged them.

They were polite when they had to talk—but nothing more. Furiously, Francesca was wondering how to get a message off to Dr. Franz without running the risk of having

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it intercepted. She thought of Flicker, but he was visiting another complex with the local Mars-ball team. And she knew it would take too long to track down Victor Fauré-Olssen and get his help.

After one frigid interchange with Li-sun, during the midmeal interlude, she caught her parents exchanging a meaningful glance that said, as if the words had been spelled out in two-meter letters—"lover's quarrel." She felt like wringing a few necks—or just one to be more precise.

"A magnificent fowl," said Li-sun, smiling at Francesca's mother as he dropped an empty food-holder in the disposal unit.

With a warm smile, his hostess said, "Don't flatter me. It's the cooking unit. Actually, there's almost nothing to do."

"But the stuffing," he persisted. "Surely, that is your own special artistry!"

Francesca's mother dimpled modestly and Francesca felt almost physically ill. Buttering up her parents like *that!* She wondered what Li-sun hoped to gain by it. Abruptly, without excusing herself, she left the table for the living section of the room, and turned on the vidarnews.

". . . The Solar System's most renowned scientific genius has disappeared from his quarters at Newsorbonne University, where he has been an honored visitor for several weeks. Up to vidar-time, there has been no suggestion of foul play, according to university and planetary police, who have been called in to help solve the mystery of Dr. Franz' disappearance. There is, however, a persistent rumor that recent investigations conducted by Dr. Franz on Earth, Venus and Mars have been sharply criticized by the Solar Institute, where Dr. Franz is currently employed, and that an investigation was about to be launched . . ."

As she listened, Francesca, though outwardly stunned, felt a growing inner awareness that she was being secretly prepared for this sudden disaster—if it was a disaster. From her subconscious came reassuring messages—messages which spoke of a time and a place for rendezvous.

She turned an accusing look of inquiry on Li-sun, who had risen to join her before the vidar-screen. But he merely shook his head and said in a near-whisper, "Someone else must have discovered the flaw I saw in your report."

She looked up at him, appalled. If that were so, the university or Solar Institute authorities would probably be on their way to question her. And if they used hypnotics—

She was going to have to get away herself—and quickly. She turned to her mother, who was regarding her sympathetically. "I'm going to lie down for a bit," she said. "This is terribly upsetting."

She wished there was some way she could manage to say good-bye

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to them decently. But it was out of the question. If the hue and cry was really up, it would be unfair to drag them in on it any further. Oddly, she had a feeling that Li-sun would be able to explain it to them. And she hated herself for trusting him in anything.

With a last look around her at the familiar things that had been part of her life before she'd gone to the university—the electronic doll, the picture reading tapes in their neat little blue wall-case, the school desert-laurel wreaths in their atmosphere-proof displayer—Francesca slipped out through the window-wall gate.

Quickly, quietly, unobtrusively, she made her way around the rear of the house to the overhung port where Ficker's air-scooter stood.

Li-sun Ybarra was waiting for her there, smoking a cigarette. "Don't be afraid, Francesca," he said. "I'm not here to stop you. I'm going with you wherever you go."

She regarded him with scorn. "So you can turn in a full report to those who sent you?" she asked caustically. He shook his head and told her, "Nobody sent me here—unless Dr. Franz did it through post-hypnotic suggestion—he had me under twice." He paused thoughtfully, and added, "There's no sense trying to stop me, Fran. I'm riding with you wherever you go. I don't know what Colin Franz has done, or what he is planning to do. But I intend to make sure you aren't hurt."

She stood there, looking at him, frowning, trying to make up her mind. He stepped close to her, gripped her elbows, and said softly, "Try to get one thing through your lovely little head, Fran. Somewhere along the line, I've fallen in love with you. I couldn't do anything against you if I wanted to."

She was touched by his obvious sincerity. But at the moment—and ever since the vidarnews dispatch—love seemed a remote, an unimportant factor. She said, because she was a woman after all, "Why me? Why a biological freak and an inexperienced girl instead of one of the Newsorbonne beauties who so openly pursue you?"

He just looked at her and then replied, "I think you know the answer to that. Now—what do you want me to do?"

"I'd like you to stay here," she said. Then she stopped and frowned again. "But that wouldn't do, would it? Not if the authorities came here and found you. You'd tell them too much, even if you tried to keep silent."

"I've thought of that, Fran," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

She climbed aboard the air-scooter and got the tiny A-motor going. "Come along then," she said. "But stay out of sight when we get to Victor's. It might complicate things."

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VI

WHEN Fran asked Victor Fauré-Olssen to loan her his red air-hopper he was more than happy to let her have it. "Just bring it back in time for the dance tomorrow night," he told her, looking into her eyes adoringly

"You'll get it back in time," she promised.

At the moment she did not know in time for what—nor how it would be returned. But it would be. Somehow she'd see to that—even though her Martian honesty seemed a trifle ridiculous at the moment.

She got it going, slowly circled the farm, and picked up Li-sun where he was waiting behind a distant outbuilding. Why, she wondered—why didn't she simply leave him there? She could have done so easily enough. But she recognized and accepted the fact that she was not operating as a free agent. Dr. Franz had planted his instructions deep in her subconscious, to emerge only when needed.

"Where are we going, Fran?" Li-sun asked her as she headed the hopper, straight as an arrow, toward the southwestern desert with its low swirl of endless dust-clouds, her hand firm on the controls.

Francesca shook her head slightly. She couldn't have told him even if she had wanted to. But deep in her mind she *knew*.

The space-ship was waiting in its immense desert pothole, sheltered from prying eyes from the sky by the overhang of an ocher-hued cliff.

Dr. Colin Franz came out of the purple shadows to meet them as they landed. "Good!" he said. "You got here quickly—and I see you brought Dr. Ybarra with you."

"I wasn't sure you wanted me to," said the girl simply. "But he insisted on coming."

"I wanted to be sure no harm came to Francesca," said Li-sun quietly, putting an arm around her.

"We can talk it over on the way to Earth," said Dr. Franz, leading the way to the space-ship's port with the easy agility of a man of half his self-acknowledged ninety years. He did not once pause, though the ground sloped steeply.

Li-sun stopped and looked at the simple, efficient beauty of the big craft before entering. "This ship," he said, "is it one of your creations, Dr. Franz? I've never seen or heard of anything like it."

Dr. Franz smiled. "No, it was planned and built by far wiser heads and hands than mine—a long while ago. But we have little time. The opposition has already moved faster than I expected they would." He ushered them into a comfortable, yet strange, cabin, where amazingly few and uncomplex instruments studded a small panel against the curved wall.

There was none of the brief but sharp acceleration-pressure of the orthodox interplanetary space-ship. They taxied out of the pothole and took off as smoothly and easily as

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a cat rising and leaping lightly from a sleeping-oval.

In what seemed an incredibly short time, Mars was fading behind them in the viewing screen, its variegated pink-and-green markings dwindling to a confused blur of color, rust-red in hue. Li-sun turned from the dramatic spectacle of the heavens and said simply, "Why Earth, Dr. Franz? I should think your enemies . . ."

"Because Earth is our destination," the scientist replied. "I don't think they can give us much trouble."

"Tell me, Doctor," said the young bio-geneticist a few thoughtful moments later, "why should there be an opposition anyway?"

"Because," Dr. Franz explained patiently, his bronzed face grave, "being human, I have made mistakes. I permitted myself to display far too open an opposition to the Earth-monopoly plans for star-flight so ardently defended by some of my colleagues. As a result they consider me a traitor to Earth."

He sighed and smiled faintly at Francesca before continuing. "You must be familiar with the very human tendency to grow careless when the end of a long and difficult task is in sight," he said. "Well, I fear that has happened to me. I made my mistake on Earth by revealing my opposition too openly and I made a mistake on Mars—by downgrading you, my dear, too sharply on your hard-radiation resistance-quotient."

"But I cannot understand the need for the deception at all?" Li-sun said.

Dr. Franz sighed ruefully. "My first error made it necessary," he told them. "When Francesca passed her tests with flying colors, all but the final phase of my assignment was complete. Had my suspicious colleagues known this, they would have put obstacles in my path—as, having learned through my stupidity, they have so often tried to do.

"You see, Francesca, the fact that you are a Martian as well as the first completely successful result of the John Franklin experiment is bound to make these Earth-monopolists squirm. And they aren't the type to squirm long without taking steps. You see, essentially, as good executives, they are men of action. I fear, my dear, that from now on, you and I are virtually outlaws."

"What about Li-sun?" the girl asked, concerned.

"Li-sun will emerge with a vast reputation," Dr. Franz said. "It is highly probable that, in time, he may take my place in the SI hierarchy."

"But I am unworthy," said the bio-geneticist.

"You are young," was the reply. "And now, if you will excuse me, I must sleep."

He lay back on his rest-oval and closed his eyes and, in a matter of seconds, was breathing heavily and evenly.

Almost at once, Li-sun was on

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his feet, stalking the cabin like a cat exploring a strange house.

"Darling," he said softly, "this is incredible. Look at the simplicity of the panel, the depth of the viewing-screen pattern! Remember how easily we took off from Mars?"

She moved closer to him reading the meaning implicit in his comment, "You mean, Li-sun, that this is an alien vessel?"

He shook his head, staring at the furnishing around them. "No, it's made for humans, quite obviously. But it is not a Solar System ship. It's far too advanced technologically."

She stared at him with a wild surmise. "Do you think it could be a star-ship?"

He shook his head. "I'm sure it's not. It hasn't bulk or power enough —unless all our scientists are wrong in theory. But isn't she a beauty!"

Desperately, hungrily, she longed to be in his arms. Insistent voices within her kept warning her that time was short for them. She said softly, "Don't make me jealous, dear."

He laughed and drew her close and whispered, "You still look about nine years old. I wonder what you'll look like when you're ninety. You'll probably be in the first flower of your youth."

She said, "Li-sun, why has this happened to me? Why do *I* have to be different? I feel like some coldly studied specimen in a biology lab. It's hard for me to believe that mother and father would cooperate on such an experiment—and Mars only knows how many before *them*. Oh, Li, darling, I think it's horrible. I *feel* horrible."

He held her close while she wept and then said gently, "You mustn't, Fran. You have been extraordinarily favored—and you must be prepared to accept extraordinary burdens—as must those who love you."

"Do you *really* love me?" she whispered.

"Would I be here if I didn't?" he said. Then, frowning, "It's strange, come to think of it, that Dr. Franz expected me. It's almost as if I were under some sort of compulsion. Do you suppose . . .? I was joking when I mentioned it before."

He looked at her and they exchanged a long glance of understanding. Not only she, but Li-sun, had been put under post-hypnotic compulsion by Dr. Franz during the tests at the university.

VII

THERE was a flicker of new light on the viewing screen, some time later, and the soft sound of a low musical note. Dr. Franz awoke at once, catlike, moved swiftly to the viewing screen, and began to press levers.

"Pursuit—are they chasing us?" Francesca asked him.

The older scientist smiled and said, without looking away, "Hard-

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ly. There's nothing in the System today that can catch this ship. But they've set up an interception pattern."

"They won't destroy us?" Li-sun's dark eyes were regarding Francesca anxiously.

"Hardly!" Dr. Franz said. "There is too much they want to learn. Besides, I could easily destroy them. This ship was built for interplanetary exploration. It is equipped for all sorts of contingencies."

Dr. Franz' deft fingers flickered over a number of pushbuttons and, in the viewing screen, the whole universe seemed to dance crazily. When it had steadied, the interception pattern was behind them.

Li-sun, who had been studying the older man, said, "Dr. Franz, who built this ship? And how did you know of it?"

Fugitive half-memories and bits of barely recalled information, whirling about in kaleidoscopic fashion, suddenly settled into a pattern in Francesca's brain. She said, slowly, "He knew of it because he's really John Franklin—and I think it was he who put it on Mars."

Dr. Franz sat down and looked at her with undisguised admiration. "Yes, I am John Franklin," he said simply. "I am John Franklin—and many other people. You see, I have had to keep creating new personalities for myself every hundred Earth-years or so. People grew suspicious otherwise."

Francesca felt her whole being fall into focus. She looked at this man and realized she must for a long time have known that he was John Franklin—at least, since early in the testing period at Newsorbonne. Knowing, she felt not affection—the idea of having this remote, double-ancestor brought suddenly to life was too large and too sudden for that—but an increase in trust. However, the one personal question remained.

"Why me, John Franklin?" she said. "Why did you choose me?"

He smiled at her. "My dear, you are an induced miracle. During the span of my life in this Solar System, I have realized as never before the importance of patterns. In my own rather larger cosmos, we live so much longer that men and events move more slowly. We are human, never fear. But our metabolism is nowhere near as rapid as that of the average Solar System man or woman.

"For that reason I have had an unparalleled opportunity to study life and history in the making and unmaking." And, after a brief pause, "It is—though the simile is far from exact and perhaps unfortunate—like the study of fruit-flies or other short-spanned creatures in a laboratory. I have been able to watch Earth find itself and expand to other planets. In my own small way, I have tried to help."

"That still doesn't answer my question," said Francesca.

"I hope it will lead to your un-

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derstanding," was the reply. "You must have guessed by this time that my home is in another star-system, far from this sun of yours. You people call it Boötes, although we, of course, have another name for it. My people, thanks partly to their long life-span, have been roving the starways a long time. With my partner, I was sent into this sector on an exploratory survey. We landed on Earth in your late eighteenth century and, shortly afterward, my partner was caught off-guard and slain by a group of wandering nomadic tribesmen.

"Had we followed instructions, either of us, it would not—it could not—have happened. But we were experienced interstellar travelers and grew careless. I have never forgiven myself, for we loved each other very deeply." He paused and, briefly, his light blue eyes were clouded.

Then he cleared his throat and went on: "Unfortunately, I was not only left bereaved but marooned—for even the simplest of star-ships needs two to operate it. The intricacies of faster-than-light drive forbid any sleep period. And a star-trip, especially from such a remote region of our universe as this Solar System, is a long journey. It is long even for us."

"I think I understand," Li-sun put in. "In order to return, you had to discover or create a new partner."

John Franklin nodded. "That was my first and, for a long time, my only assignment. Luckily, there were humans on Earth, however inadequate for my purposes. It was necessary for me to employ genetics—to breed, if I may put it crudely. At least it was possible. On many other systems, it would have been out of the question."

He shuddered. "Believe me, it was not easy. And my disappointments, to say nothing of my emotional involvements, were endless. Remember, I am human, too, whatever you may think me now. I loved, I lost, and I saw promising blood-lines destroyed by sickness or war or accident. And, gradually, I became increasingly involved in the progress of Solar society.

"That is how I became aware of patterns—and why your emergence at this time, Francesca, is nothing less than an induced miracle. For Solar System humanity is going to need help in the near future more than it ever has before."

"I don't understand," said Li-sun, knitting his brows. "Surely, with all of our recent development—"

"Remember the appalling atomic wars on Earth that preceded space-flight and colonization of the other planets?" said John Franklin. "If only humanity—Solar humanity—could have had outside help to speed up their science, to show them the way out of the political and economic dead-ends that bred that holocaust! But at the time I had no dedicated helper capable of taking me off the Earth, so that I

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could bring the aid so desperately needed. For a time, I thought, I would see the planet's utter destruction."

"How does that period of horror hold a significant relationship to the present?" Li-sun wanted to know.

"Unless Solar humanity is shown the road to the nearer stars there will be a repetition of the disaster," John Franklin replied. "Already Earth, Venus, Mars and the large moons of Jupiter are being exploited to the full. All that remains are the great moons of Saturn. And at the present rate of progress they will not be available much longer. Once the System is packed full, trouble will come again. And this time the weapons of destruction are too dreadful to contemplate."

A third time, Francesca asked, "But why did you choose me?"

John Franklin shifted his position to look fully at her. "Because you are the first person capable of star-flight ever born in the Solar System. You are Virginia Dare and Peregrine White and all the others rolled into one. You are the first *successful* result of my genetic experiment. You have the intelligence, the radiation-resistance and above all, you have the longevity. You are the rebred golden palomino or the giant urus of Europe—a lost strain reborn. You are, to all intents and purposes, a Boötean, not a child of this sun."

She looked at him, seeking in his face some reassurance that would make her feel human still. And she found it—in the kind wisdom of his eyes and the smile that lifted his deeply-lined mouth. She said, her voice faint, "Then I am to go to the stars with you, John Franklin?"

He nodded. "I cannot order you. But you will."

She looked at Li-sun and saw that he, too, was smiling at her. And she knew then that he loved her and that she loved him in return with all her heart. She got up and stood before the viewing screen watching a tiny Earth begin to swim into view.

At that moment, she wanted to be touched or talked to by no man. She wondered how much her parents had known—or could have known. Nor could she blame John Franklin for what he had done to her.

Worst of all, she could not even weep. There was no place for her to go—except to the stars. No possible other place.

VIII

A FEW thousand miles outside Earth's atmosphere, there was another, more determined, effort to intercept their ship. Like gleaming blue-hooded hornets, the ships of Solarian warriors came weaving into their pattern. Their bolts shot across the bows of the alien spaceship and ricocheted harmlessly away from its dark hull.

"I believe they're trying to burn

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us!" Li-sun cried suddenly. "Why? *why?*"

"Because they fear us," said John Franklin simply. "In their first attempt they sought only to surround and capture us. But when they saw what manner of ship this is, and how easily we out-maneuvered them they became mortally terrified. And because fear grows by what it feeds on, and we are headed toward Earth, they are determined to destroy us."

"What are we going to do?" Francesca asked.

For answer, the older man rose once more and returned to the seemingly simple instrument panel. Again his strong, sensitive fingers flickered over a pushbutton pattern.

This time, the planet in front of them, as well as the attacking ships seemed to blur and explode on the screen. Then, again, the pursuing craft were behind them and they were circling to enter the atmosphere of a much closer Earth.

"What did you do?" Li-sun asked, his face as grim as death.

John Franklin smiled. "It is called missile-evasion," he said, "as nearly as I can translate it in terrestrial terms. Since I am leaving this pinnace with you, perhaps it is time to explain."

"You're leaving it with *me?*" Li-sun was incredulous. "To what purpose, sir?"

"It will help a little," he said. "Not only you, but Solar humanity. While Solar ships are vastly efficient this vessel has many features they will not be able to duplicate for many decades. Let me show you. Come over here, young man."

Francesca watched in silent wonder as her still-living ancestor demonstrated the various powers of what he called a pinnace. For the rest, she sought to reorientate her thinking and readjust her emotions in terms of the future, the incredible future that had expanded so suddenly and miraculously before her.

Emotional adjustment proved the harder task. She watched Li-sun as he listened eagerly to what John Franklin was saying about atmospheric deceleration, hovering controls, visibility screens, take-off regulation and the like. And she was woman enough to wish he were not *quite* so interested. Didn't the sweet idiot know this was the last period they would have alone together?

John Franklin had not told her just how long the trip to Boötes would take in Earth or Mars years. Nor had she been able to summon the courage to ask. But within herself, somehow, she knew that it was going to be a long, long trip. She wondered how she would look, grown to her full maturity, at its conclusion. And then she instantly despised herself for such vain and frivolous thinking.

They landed beneath the atmosphere-clouded stars of Earth. A dim, sorry spectacle the planet seemed after the blazing black skies of

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space, and the brighter spectacle of a Martian night.

Under John Franklin's supervision, Li-sun brought the pinnace in as easily, as lightly, as a feather on a desolate mountainside somewhere in a region in deep central Asia that reminded Francesca of vidarshots she had seen of the Moon's dark hemisphere.

"There is little time. They will soon track us down," warned John Franklin.

He left the two of them alone together in the cold night air while he disappeared behind a towering boulder formation into the mountain itself.

"I don't want to go," said Francesca, clinging to him fiercely. "I don't want to leave you."

"Be quiet, darling." He kissed her quickly, passionately. "You have no choice. Besides, if you think I want you around in the full bloom of youth while I'm decaying into senility you underrate my ego."

But his voice trembled a little and she loved him for his complete honesty. She said, "Try to have a grandson as handsome as yourself, waiting for my return."

"It won't be easy," he assured her. And then he was no longer firmly in command of himself. He cried, "Why can't I go to the stars with you?" And then, quickly, "Don't answer that, darling."

But Francesca was no longer listening. A great patch of the mountainside was sliding back upon itself, revealing a huge, dimly-lit cavern. And in the cavern was an immense vessel of intricately incredible design—a ship as unlike a Solar interplanetary spacer as that evolved craft resembled one of the early automotive vehicles on twentieth-century Earth. It whispered of boundless power, of unfathomable human achievement, of freedom in galactic flight.

"*Look* at it!" Li-sun's voice was reverent.

"Yes, look at it," said John Franklin, who had emerged to stand beside them once more. "Look at it well, Li-sun, for you will never see its like again. By the time one —or both of us—return to bring to the Solar System the guidance and aid its people must have to survive, you will be long gone."

His eyes were compassionate.

Li-sun's gaze moved from John Franklin to Francesca and all at once he looked haggard and afraid. He said, "Leaving me here—as perhaps you must—have you given thought as to what I am to do?"

"Your task will be a great one, Li-sun," John Franklin said. "You will carry on my work here. You have the pinnace, to control human expansion through the Solar System—and you have sufficient knowledge and qualifications to continue my experiment. There will be other Francescas—your Mendelian law makes that certain—and you must seek them out and prepare them, for they will be Earth's ambassadors to the stars.

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"And when your life is fading, you must prepare others to carry on the work, to see that these planets do not destroy themselves before we can return. Can you do it?"

"I can try," said Li-sun, meeting the starman's gaze unflinchingly. "I can try."

"You'll do," said John Franklin, turning back toward the great ship in the cavern.

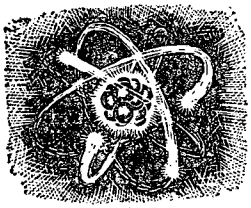
Li-sun looked after him, then turned to Francesca, who flung herself, sobbing, into his arms. She could weep now, but there was no relief in her tears—only grief.

"Darling, live well—for me," she said.

His own eyes were full and his voice unsteady, as he said, "I'll do my best—and perhaps when you come back, I'll have a grandson ready for you."

"Come Francesca!" called John Franklin from the star-ship entrance. "They have tracked us here. We have little time."

"I'm coming," said Francesca. Somehow she tore herself from Li-sun's embrace and stumbled toward the great ship within the cavern. It was going to be a long voyage back . . .



Among the Contributors to Next Month's Issue will be

THEODORE STURGEON, *with* "So Near the Darkness"

CHARLES W. PRICE, JR., *with* "The Elephant Hound"

ETHEL G. LEWIS, *with* "Device for Decadence"

RICHARD STOCKHAM, *with* "Back to Normal"

F. B. BRYNING, *with* "Infant Prodigy"

ROBERT F. YOUNG, *with* "The First Sweet Sleep of Night"

and many others

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the nostopath

by . . . Bryce Walton

In fifty million miles of space there was never a man quite so cut off from happiness as Barton.

BARTON WATCHED the transport dissolve into space. From the asteroid Tower he watched it until its blinker that distinguished it from a few billion stars winked out for good. And then, surprisingly enough, he felt very happy about being absolutely alone, fifty million miles from Earth, and a lot farther than that from anyplace else that could ever make any difference.

Only later—he never knew how much later—did he begin thinking seriously about what the psychologist had told him—that he might go insane.

He couldn't understand why it was that he had had such a bad time at home on Earth with Beatrice, Jackie and the whole damn family routine. And that now, where he should be unhappy, he was enjoying himself for the first time since he could remember.

He felt free. It was like a vacation. He could sleep as long as he liked. When he woke up he didn't have a headache as he usually did at home, and he didn't feel the pressure all around him.

A phobia can be a terrifying thing, utterly beyond the control of the unfortunate victim. Fear of high places and of open spaces, fear of animals and confined spaces—all these can cheat a man of happiness and darken the future for him. But the kind of fear which Bryce Walton so masterfully depicts in this exciting story is unique, for it is linked to the greatest of human needs in a world where space travel is a reality, and a man must dream of home fires brightly burning, or run the risk of losing his sanity.

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If you didn't mind being alone, the Tower was a great place to spend some time—but whether you could stand two years of it was another question. The big observation room was comfortably furnished. The lounge was a bachelor's dream.

He'd always wanted to be creative, self-expressive. There were home-study courses in practically everything. Crafts, wood-working, metal-working, leather-craft, carpentry, sculpting, woodwork, modeling in clay, soap, with pieces of wire and bits of cardboard and string and odd shapes of metal. There were art-studies, and courses in literature and music and anything a man could ever become interested in—alone.

He read all the little psychology pamphlets on how to get along with himself.

His official duties were light, routine, very simple. As a Watcher, he only had to Watch, check instruments, keep the atomic power units functioning—or rather check them to be sure they were still functioning properly. The warning signals were automatic. All he had to do was receive them, if they ever came, and send on the warning to the Military Base on Linden in Sector 24.

The chances of an enemy ship appearing within range of the instruments were slim. So Barton didn't worry about some Centaurian goopship somewhere out in the void. At least the theory was that it was an enemy from Centauris. No one really knew. The war could go on for hundreds of years without anyone ever finding out who it was with or why.

The psychologist had said that the Watch could only be kept by one. More than one was too risky. It seemed that one could remain sane much more easily than two together. Something about the danger of interrelated conflict.

He made up an especially rigorous routine for himself, and stuck by it with fortitude, but somewhere, sometime, the routine went to pieces. Time became a vague and meaningless and utterly unnecessary imposition which he abandoned. And for a long time, he never knew how long, he took refuge in sleep. Sleep had always been his kindest friend, and ally against depressions and worry.

He didn't check the chronos, and when he did accidently glance at one he would find that a week, sometimes months had passed, unnoticed and unmourned.

He forgot about all the studies and crafts too. And when sleep itself became boring, he took a deeper and more dramatic refuge in memory. It was funny, but his past, as he relived it, was more vivid and interesting than when he actually had been living it.

He got the feeling that perhaps this might be dangerous, and at those times he would attempt to face the present reality on the asteroid. Sometimes there was the

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present and he had to look at it. There was just that darkness out there. There was nothing familiar about it, and that was the trouble. And it never had any real substance or significance—except the significance of loneliness, alienness and brooding fear. You couldn't relate to the great hollow night, nor the thousand dots of lights.

Anything was better than to let the mind start traveling away out there into—whatever it was.

And to look out at the piece of space debris he was living on was no better than trying to relate to the emptiness, the awful emptiness, that went beyond it. The asteroid was roughly cylindrical, maybe twenty-five miles long and seven miles thick, with crags and gashes breaking in scars on its surface forming only jumbles of blackened stone. It had no meaning at all, nothing to relate to, nothing to go out to—without a feeling that you would go but one way and keep on going.

It was totally unfamiliar, inhuman, alien to the warm blood of a man. There had never been any kind of life there, probably not even some alien spore from somewhere else no human had ever seen. Not even simple flora, or an invisible germ. Not even light of any familiar kind, but a muted deathly kind of reflection of the Belt's weak light. There hadn't even been time until man came along.

But one man couldn't put much time into all that emptiness.

He looked out at the asteroid as it was one last time. He saw one hasty vision of harsh rock, ragged black pits, craters and twisted frozen magma, dully lit with non-human light, and eery shadows like living holes of nothing creeping over the rough slope.

He knew he couldn't look out there at it again.

When later he got the idea for a New Deal for Watchers, he knew that it was right and that the officials back on Earth would act on his suggestion. He worked the whole thing out carefully, summed it up in a report, and sent it by spacegram directly to the Commander-in-Chief.

The reply from Headquarters came in even as he was working, preparing things for the colonists. Headquarters was pleased with his report, and they were acting on it at once. His report checked with those of other Watchers—and no one man could stand it, even as Barton had said, and from now on every Watcher would have company, his family and others.

It was such an obvious way out that Barton wondered why he had been the first to think of it.

Barton had been on the asteroid one year and eight months when the ship arrived, its signal preceding it by twenty minutes. He signaled back, prepared the gravetic hooks that would bring the ship into the Tower, through the interconnecting locks.

He had time to shave, dress care-

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fully in his nylon uniform, before they arrived. It was the first time he had bothered with his physical appearance much for a long time. He was a bit surprised at how he looked—no different than he had when he'd left Earth two years back.

They came out of the lock into the big observation room and greeted him with a great deal of respect and enthusiasm. There were men, women and children—craftsmen, scientists, technicians, doctors, and though he had some qualms about their attitude about giving up life on Earth to live on an asteroid, the doubts soon went away. They were proud to serve, and, as one of them later pointed out— "This is better than feeling guilty about not doing enough for the war effort against those damn invisible Centaurians!"

It took him quite a while to get acquainted with all of them because, under the best of conditions, it still took him a while to get to know anybody—but within the next few months they were all close friends, intimate and close in a new and finer way than he had ever known friendships to be on Earth.

But on that first day when they arrived, he scarcely even saw them.

He was waiting for Beatrice and his son, Jackie.

They were the last to enter. The others, exclaiming, explored the Tower rooms, and then drifted out through the tubeways and into the various domes that Barton had built for them to live in.

"Look! How did he do it all?"

"Why—it's unbelievable!"

"What a splendid achievement!"

And then there didn't seem to be anything else in the Universe except Barton and the two who came toward him. The lock seemed dim, much longer than it had before, like a long hallway. But there they were, coming toward him, Beatrice leading Jackie by the hand. They were leaning toward him, expectantly, with flushed faces, and he could feel the climax rising up all around him.

For they had waited a long time and had traveled fifty million miles, across space, the greatest gulf of all . . . and all the time thinking of him, and knowing that it was all on his account, and that at the end of the funnel of space and time, he was waiting.

She dropped Jackie's hand and ran laughing with joy into Barton's arms.

Suddenly he felt not only gladness that they were here, but a sudden great joy in having her in his arms, a feeling he had never felt with her before. He remembered the quarrels they had had before, the irritations, the nagging and how sometimes, even though he'd loved his wife and kid and home, he would stay out at night on some pretext or other, then feel guilty for it. He remembered how she had cried and accused him of not loving her on that day when he had volunteered to be a Watcher.

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Now she seemed altogether different, like someone else. The long absence, and the long journey, had changed a lot of things. Time and space clasped together, its coldness and immeasurableness became closeness and warmth.

"Oh, God, I'm so happy, so happy," she whispered over and over.

"So am I," Barton said.

She looked up at him. She wasn't crying now at all. She was smiling. She seemed strong and proud of him now. Everything was sure different this time. Jackie stood there looking very grown up and capable of taking care of himself, and even he had changed a lot. Vaguely, Barton remembered that Jackie had been a spindly kid, always whining and begging and staring with big accusative eyes.

"We played the records so we could hear your voice every day and not forget it," Beatrice said. She put her arm about his waist. He held her very tightly, hardly believing things could have changed so much.

"Come over here, Bea, you and Jackie." He led them over to the big observation panes. "Look," he said. He waved his hand out over the surface of the asteroid, at the domes and tubeways he had built, at the schoolhouse for the kids, the gymnasium and all the rest of it.

Beatrice stared, then shook her head slowly as her hand gripped his arm. "It was a wonderful wonderful thing," she said softly. "You did—all of this—all yourself?"

He nodded. "Of course I had a long time to do it."

"Oh, darling, it must have seemed a lot longer than it was too."

"It would have, but I had something to really work on, and a lot to look forward to."

A little man with a fatigue suit and an old woman who looked something like Barton's mother had looked before she died, came running in. "I tell you, it's unbelievable!" He grabbed Barton's hand. "You mean to tell me, young man, that you did all this—alone?"

"There sure wasn't anyone else here to lend a hand," smiled Barton.

"Why the kitchens are wonderful," the woman said. "And the schoolhouse, and the playground for the children! And those toys—did you build those too?"

"Toys?" Jackie said.

"Well, I learned a lot about carpentry and all kinds of crafts here," Barton said. "And I had some extra time, so I made some things for the kids."

"For me too," Jackie said. But not whiningly this time, but as though to suggest that if Barton hadn't made any toys for him too, he would understand and he wouldn't feel hurt about it at all.

"Sure," Barton said. "Go through that door, Jackie. We're going to live in there. You have a room of your own in there. You go in there and see what it's like."

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Solemnly, with dignity in spite of his anticipation, Jackie went through the door.

"I feel like one of those pioneer women from the old days," laughed the woman.

"We're going to do a lot with this asteroid," said the little man in the fatigue suit. "We'll transform it into a garden in space. Why—Barton—this is a great idea. We'll create our own society here. We'll make our own simple laws, live in the kind of simplicity that we never had on Earth."

"That's what I figured," Barton said. "I can't figure why they didn't do this before. All that trouble with Watchers, finding out whether they could stand the loneliness."

"And you thought of this," Beatrice said . . .

Here was a little world, his world, a few people each necessary and known to the other, a simple set of rules, measurable goals, realizable, clear, understandable to all, and every one of them with a personal feeling of dignity and belonging.

There wasn't a one of them who wasn't a lot happier here than they had ever been all caught up in their individuality and lost in the big, too complex social machinery from which they had come.

Later they wanted to call it BARTON'S WORLD, and erect some kind of a monument but the idea embarrassed Barton. They considered him as their leader. But actually there was no leader. They were equals and each had a role to play and they were happy. None of them had ever been so happy before.

It ended abruptly, without even any kind of warning, except that flashing signal just five minutes before the cruiser came out of space.

Barton ran to the intercom. "A ship's coming in here," he yelled. He felt Beatrice's presence beside him. She was calm though and her hand was warm and confident on his shoulder.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I don't know yet," he said. "But I've got a feeling maybe they'll want us to go back to Earth!"

"But—nobody wants to go back."

"I know that! But what if the war's over, and officially we're not supposed to stay here anymore?"

He yelled into the intercom. "Everybody stay there in the domes, and if there's trouble, we'll fight for what we decided on. If they want us to go back to Earth, we'll try to reason with them. If they insist, then we'll fight as best we can with the weapons we made."

He turned. "Bea—take Jackie and lock yourselves in Jackie's room. If they try to force us to leave, go on into the dome where we agreed you could hide."

"But you—"

"I'll do what I can. Maybe it'll work out all right. Go on—run—get out of here!"

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He was proud of her. She walked, very straight and brave, to the door, turned, smiled at him confidently, and then went through the door and closed it. How different she was from the nagging, almost childish person—

The door of the lock opened.

"I'm Commander Maxson. This is Lieutenants Holt, Warren and Soderman. Mr. Barton, I know it's been a long, long time, but greetings! The war's over, Barton! All over!"

Barton scarcely heard the words. He was trying to figure out what the expressions on their faces were supposed to mean. Their faces were puckered and their eyes were too wide, and they looked at him with a strangely withdrawn look, partly shock one would think, and one of them was turning pale as though he was sick. That was Holt.

"We're glad to see you, Barton."

The commander was short and fat with a lot of gold braid and a pink face but with wrinkles around his eyes that gave him a somewhat pleasant appearance. He looked all around the observation room, then back at Barton, then stuck out his hand. He shook hands quickly, then jerked his hand away. His fingers were shaking. The other two just kept staring at Barton.

"What in hell's the matter with me?" Barton yelled.

"Oh—nothing, nothing!" Commander Maxson said quickly. "We're—just—surprised to see you looking—so well, that's all."

"Surprised? Why?"

"What a damn awful stink!" Holt said. He gasped and took one step and then made a choking sound and sat down.

They all kept staring at Barton. The little man, Soderman with the thick lips and the disturbingly black eyes rubbed his mouth nervously. "Come on, Commander, let's not waste any time. Let's get him out of here!"

"Yes, and as rapidly as possible," said Warren. He was tall, angular, and had a cynical kind of look to him.

Holt's lips were white and he held his nose. "This place is rotten!" he said.

"I'm afraid we'll have to be leaving now, heading back to Earth," Maxson said.

"Why?"

"Well, it's just one of those official things! Ah—you don't mean you want to stay here!"

"He must be crazy," Warren said. He laughed a little.

"I want to stay," Barton said.

"Well, maybe it will be possible for you to come back. But it'll have to be done through the regular channels. Meanwhile—"

"I don't want to leave," Barton insisted. "Not a person here wants to leave."

The other three looked around quickly. "They don't, huh," grinned Warren.

"I'm their, well, president, sort

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of," Barton said. "Nothing military about it. They just elected me—"

"President," Warren said.

"Yes, that's right." Barton backed away a few steps. "It was my idea, setting up the colony here, so that's why they did it, I guess. But now that the war's over we'd all like to stay on. An agreement was signed by everybody. They all agreed that they would rather stay. I'll show you—"

Holt tried to get up. He sank back down, holding his stomach. Soderman and Warren made a jump for Barton. He turned quickly, ran to the door behind which Beatrice and Jackie were hiding.

"What's the idea?" Barton said. "Can't you even talk a thing over without trying to beat a guy up?"

Commander Maxson wiped his mouth again. "Barton, listen to me now. You know what pressure a Watcher has to live under, being alone and—well, you knew before you volunteered. It can affect a man in peculiar ways. But our psychologists can fix things up."

"We all have a right to stay here!" Barton yelled.

"But now the war's over," Maxson said. "We captured a Centaurian ship finally, got information and captured several others. It was quick and easy then, soon as we understood a little about them. It'll be at least a thousand years before any other ships get here from Centauris. There'll be no need of Watchers."

"But we all want to stay here anyway," Barton said.

The four men looked quickly around again, then at one another.

"How many of you are here?" Warren said. His grin broadened a little.

"Twenty-five," Barton said. "But you should have a record of that. It's all in my report." Maybe they'd been way out in some other sector all the time, didn't understand the change in set-up.

"Commander," Warren said, "let's get out of here. I would suggest—"

"I haven't asked you for any suggestions," Commander Maxson said. He kept on looking at Barton. He seemed very ill-at-ease. "We have to go back, Barton," he whispered.

"That damnable smell," Holt groaned.

Barton ran to the observation panes. "Just take a look! I don't see why you don't believe—or understand! But look there!"

The officers looked at one another oddly, all except Warren who merely seemed bored. Holt managed to get up as the commander motioned, and all of them walked toward Barton and looked out as Barton indicated.

"What an awful rock to spend two years on," Soderman said. "One week on it would finish me."

"I'm sick," Holt said. "I never smelled anything so damn awful!"

"Everyone of those people out there in those domes want to stay

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here," Barton explained patiently, proudly. "They're happy, happier than they'd ever be or ever were on Earth." He flicked on the intercom. "Listen to them."

They listened. Barton heard the sounds of living out there, picked up by the sensitive mikes, voices, whisperings, people living where there had never been any life before.

As though very tired, Maxson turned away, pressed his eyes. Without looking up, he said, "We understand how it's been here, Barton. Maybe we don't act like it, but we understand. We've all been out in space plenty ourselves."

"Come on," Warren said. "For God's sake, Commander, let's get out of here before *we* start seeing ghosts."

"Ghosts," Barton said. He smiled. Maybe they were space-happy. Maybe they had been out into space too long.

"I can't stand the smell," Holt said. "I—I've got to go back aboard. I'll get some oxygen masks."

"Go ahead," Maxson said. "And stay there."

"Thanks," Holt said and staggered into the lock and closed the door.

"Come on, Barton. It's not up to me to change the rules. Maybe when you're back on Earth we can arrange for you to come back. If you'll come along with us—"

Barton backed to the door that concealed Beatrice and Jackie.

Warren and Soderman walked over, stood on either side of the commander.

"You've done excellent work here," Maxson said. "Believe me, we'll all of us always be grateful for what you've done. Whether you understand it or not now. Rank, medals, commendations, nothing can adequately repay you for what you've done."

"Just staying here would be reward enough," Barton said. "Here with my family."

"Family—" Maxson said. He repeated it hoarsely.

"Yes—Beatrice, my wife, and *my son, Jackie.*" Maybe it would be better he decided then to introduce his family to the commander. The commander seemed like a decent person, and maybe that would be a thing worth trying. If that didn't work then they would have to fight for what they thought was right.

Anyway, he wouldn't let any of them through the door. They could look in.

He opened the door. He flicked on the light. Soderman and Warren peered into the room. Maxson kept on looking at Barton a moment, then he looked in too. Barton could see Jackie and Beatrice. Jackie had the toy rocket Barton had made for him, and he stood there straight and smiling and brave. Jackie wasn't afraid of them, and he wasn't going to be upset if Barton had to leave. Things were different now.

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Smiling, poised, Beatrice walked toward them, then stopped and bowed slightly.

Barton introduced everybody. Soderman and Warren just kept on staring into the room, saying nothing. Commander Maxson finally turned back to Barton, seeming very tired now. His shoulders sagged. All of them must have had a very rough time in space somewhere, Barton thought."

"Guess I haven't been a very good host," Barton said. "Let's all have something to eat, a drink, and talk this over."

"No, no," Commander Maxson said. "Thanks though. But—really—we've got to be going now."

Barton smiled. "Well, I guess now you can see why I've got to stay here. My family here and everything. There wouldn't be any reason for my going back to Earth, would there? What good would it do now?"

The commander stammered a little bit, then said, "Ah—Barton, listen. I'll make a little deal with you. Your friends and your family can stay if you'll come back to Earth with us. Ah—wait a minute now. You'll come with us as a kind of representative, you understand? I didn't know the others were here. My orders don't include them. Just you. You come, they can stay. And no doubt you'll soon be back here with them. In fact, I can practically guarantee it."

Barton didn't trust any of them now, not even the commander. He jerked the revolver from under his coat.

"I'm a good shot," he said. "There are fifteen charges here."

The officers stared at his hand. Warren grinned again. "Now wait a minute, Barton. You know you—a Watcher can't possibly have any kind of handgun like—"

They made a unified rush and he started firing. For a moment then, something important that had burned inside Barton almost went out. Something was operating he couldn't understand. The gun fired all right, and he knew he couldn't miss. But the officers kept running as though protected by some kind of force.

Maybe the charges were deficient. No—that couldn't be.

He yelled at them to get back, and he emptied the charges, but nothing happened. He felt that sudden awful emptiness, the terror that comes when all depends on some logical pattern that is suddenly something else.

He threw the heavy gun directly into the commander's face. He saw it strike the puffy neck, but the commander didn't seem to feel it. Barton struck out savagely with his fists, and this time reality came back. Warren swung backward and sprawled on the floor. Blood ran out of his mouth and then he was twisting to get up.

Barton got through the door, and locked it against them. "Beatrice!"

They stood in one another's arms in the center of the room. Bravely,

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Jackie watched them, ready to fight or to hide, but unafraid. Overhead, through the small opaque square of the ceiling, the brilliant white memories of a million suns shone.

"Listen, Bea. I've got to go back to Earth!"

"No—no that's not right."

"I know. But I've got to. If I fight against it, it'll only cause trouble for the rest of you."

"You can't go alone."

"I've got to. If I go, and the rest of you stay here, maybe I can convince the authorities that you and the others should stay here. Then maybe I can come back. I'll do everything I can to get back."

"I know you will."

"But if I don't come back, you'll still be all right, you and Jackie."

"Yes. But we'll miss you."

He held her face in his shaking hands. "Why is it so different now? Before when I left you cried and accused me of leaving you—and everything. Now—you're like a different person."

"I found out that I really loved you," she said. "I loved you, not for what you could give to me—but just because I loved you."

He felt good this time, even though he had to leave them. He didn't feel guilty. He didn't want to go, but still he felt good.

He told her how he felt and she nodded, and she understood. She smiled up at him and her hands were warm against his back. "You know how much Jackie and I love you—"

"Yes. And you know how much I love you."

He pressed her to him and crushed his last kiss upon her. It was—was so different too—all of it, as she let him drink deeply, openly, without qualification, of the sweetness of her. Her whole body yearned to him, muscle and bone and flesh to flesh. It had never been that way before.

This time, he didn't even have to say good-bye.

When he came out, the officers were waiting. He saw the case one of them had brought in, now open, full of needles, bits of steel, syringes—

He didn't even have time to tell them he was ready to go with them. They overpowered him with weight. He hardly felt the needle in his arm.

THE PSYCHOLOGIST walked to the window. Commander Maxson leaned forward in his chair. "I sympathize with Barton," he said. "But your idea—it's wasteful, impractical."

"Is it?" The psychologist said. "My job is to do what I can, psychologically, for those under my jurisdiction. In that sense, my job is the same as any other officer's. In that area, my authority is superior to anyone else's. I'm sending him back."

"I can't see it," Maxson said. "One man—insane—millions of credits of expense—to take a man into—where—nowhere?"

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"Into life—for him at least."

"But you said yourself he could probably never be cured!"

"Cured! But I guess he deserves some happiness." The psychologist pressed the buzzer of the intercom. Outside the window, Chicago blinked off and on in the later evening, for the first time in over five hundred years. "Bring in Mr. Barton please."

Maxson shrugged. "All right, have it your way. But you think he can sustain all this fantasy, make it stay real, hold it all together with his own logic? To him, it was all so damn real—the domes, the life up there, people, his family—"

"I hope he can. Anyway, here on Earth, he was always pathological anyway. You see, he was a nostopath."

"What the devil's that?"

"Pathogenic homecoming. It differentiates the sickness attributable to coming home from that of nostalgia. It's common among soldiers, oddly enough. It's a sickness resulting, not from being away from home in combat, but from having to return home. Home is the pathogenic agent."

"That's a strange twist."

"Yes. Many beg to remain in combat rather than return to the unbearable sense of responsibility, obligation and growing guilt of being the head of a family—a role they never feel capable of. Their civilian adjustment was always precarious, liable to snap any time. Barton's home life was never anything but a temporary illusion."

"Ummmm," Maxson said.

"Barton volunteered to be a Watcher for only one reason, Maxson—to get away from home. And he structured his fantasies so he would never feel it necessary to return to Earth."

"He transported his family," Maxson said, "in his own mind, to that asteroid, and a whole colony to keep them company."

"But this time it was the kind of family he wanted, and the friends he wanted. He certainly would never again have the desire to come back to Earth to a family—that was no longer here."

Maxson looked out the window. "Well, what about his real family? The one that, as far as he's concerned, isn't here on Earth at all any more? His wife and kids. It must be a devil of a thing for them."

The psychologist smiled, rather sadly. "There was a pretty real basis for Barton's marital apprehension. Unconsciously, he knew his wife had no real love or respect for him, that there was nothing but a morbid dependency on him, that she would always demand more of him than any human being could supply."

Maxson turned abruptly. "What—you mean his wife here—she doesn't give a damn?"

"Not now. She's already found somebody else."

"The devil!"

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"Yes, someone else. But, in a sense, her new find isn't much more real to her than Barton's fantasy-importation to a far asteroid is to him. She's seeing in him only what she needs to feed her own sick emptiness, not what he really is. I'm not sure that Barton's way isn't the most humane. It's better to create your needs harmlessly out of thin air, than to warp and twist and distort another human being for that purpose."

The door opened. Barton entered, an attendant on either side of him.

The psychologist smiled at him. "Hello, Barton. I've finally got it through. You're going back."

For the first time since coming back to Earth, Barton smiled. "Thank you, sir. I'm—I'm more grateful than I can tell you. When do I leave?"

"At once. We're all very interested in what you did on that asteroid, Barton. It's a kind of social experiment. We're all anxious to see how it turns out. You'll send me regular reports?"

"Of course, sir. I—I just can't wait to see my wife and kid again."

"But you're not anxious or anything about them?"

"Oh, no, sir. They're perfectly able to take care of themselves now. My being away for two years, it sure changed them a lot."

They shook hands, and then Barton, with an attendant on either side, went out. The psychologist stared at the door a long time after it closed. Then he sat down.

"You mean to tell me," Maxson said sharply, "that Barton's seen his wife and kids here and doesn't even recognize them?"

The psychologist interrupted. "They were brought together here, the first day, but Barton—well, it wasn't even a case of his seeing them as someone else. It was complete negative hallucination. *He didn't see them at all.*"

"I wonder," Maxson said, as he went toward the door, "what my wife sees when she looks at me? I wonder—"

The psychologist smiled. "Maybe you could wonder what your wife would look like—if you really saw her as she is."

ONLY THE psychologist was there to see the ship leave that was taking Barton back home.

Watching the ship disappear into space, becoming just another small star that went out, the psychologist thought of the words from the *Fragments* of Master Eckhart. And always after that when he thought of Barton, whom no one ever heard from again, he thought of those words:

"That I am a man, this I share with other men. That I see and hear and that I eat and drink is what all animals do likewise. But that I am I is only mine and belongs to me; to no other men, not to an angel nor to God."

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an apartment for rent

by . . . Ruth Sterling

Choosing an apartment was really a life and death matter to them. But how could Conroy have known?

"GOOD MORNING," the woman said with a smile. "My husband and I were passing the Park Towers and noticed the sign. We came to inquire if the apartment is still available."

Mr. Conroy looked up from his morning paper at the couple who had stepped with incredible lightness into the real-estate office and were now standing expectantly before his desk. With a discerning eye, trained in the fine art of character appraisal through years of dealing with only the most affluent and exclusive of clients, he nodded approval and his pursed lips squeezed out a refined smile.

At last, he thought jubilantly, here were the *only* two people who would fit into the magnificent Park Towers apartment.

"Certainly," he said, staring with admiration at the woman. What an extraordinarily lovely creature she was. To Mr. Conroy, who was not yet indifferent to romance, she conjured up the witchery of springtime and a host of perfumed visions. With difficulty, his eyes shifted to the man. He noticed the

You might think being married to a distinguished research physician with degrees from Harvard and Johns Hopkins and writing "boy-meets-girl" stories for the "smooth-paper" publications would take up most of Ruth Sterling's time. But having crashed Collier's and the most exacting of the literary reviews, she has decided she has a bent for fantasy and would like to crash that field too. For a story as good as this, why shouldn't we oblige?

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smooth cut of his suit and the nicely mannered way he offered a cigarette from a gold case, and decided unequivocally that here was a gentleman.

What a perfect match they were for the apartment so recently vacated. This woman, by all standards of artistic justice, required the proper setting. In a flash of imagery he placed her in the apartment, with her slender patrician elegance moving graciously among clusters of deep-red roses, or bending over to light the silver candlesticks with her face a pale radiance over the flames.

Yes, they definitely belonged there.

His slender mustache expanded with satisfaction at his correct judgment. "I shall be very happy to show the apartment to you," he said with the gratification of one bestowing a welcomed gift. "Just one moment, please. I'll get the keys and tell my secretary I'm leaving."

From an adjoining room he heard the woman say, "Oh, Timothy, for a moment I was afraid," and her husband's reassuring, "now Kendreth, I told you it would be better if we did it properly."

Mr. Conroy turned the word, "Properly" over in his mind, following it to several conclusions, and firmly rejecting each in turn. "It doesn't matter," he smiled, pleased at his worldly approach. "The important thing is to rent the place."

Unfortunately he had never met the original tenants of the apartment. They had moved in before he had taken over management of the building. But he had enjoyed receiving the rent checks from them each month. Not for any mercenary reasons, but because occasionally with a check would come a little amusing note, a complaint usually about some minor defect that needed repairing, delightfully and inoffensively phrased.

Where another tenant would have stated brusquely, "The faucet needs fixing, please be quick about it," a message from them might say the same thing with milder reproachment: "We enjoy the hot water. It's a shame to see so much of it go down the drain."

The man, Mr. Conroy understood, had been a successful writer, and his wife, a designer, her professional talent accounting for that exquisitely furnished home. He had always planned to pay them a personal visit, as he liked to have social contact with his tenants. But before he could get around to it it was too late.

It was only a month before that they had left on that ill-fated air-trip to Mexico. He had read about the crash in the papers, with shocked recognition of their names. Because he felt he had known them so well, he took it as a keen, personal loss.

They left behind them an expensive apartment, and even in these days of still moderately distressing shortage, it had not been easy to rent. The first to take it after the

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accident had been the Westons, a gray-haired gentle pair whose folksy manners seemed better suited to a farm than to urban luxury. Desperate as they had been for a place to live, they had lasted exactly two days. Being a man of great sensitivity, Mr. Conroy had understood, and the reason they had given for leaving he had accepted with delicacy.

"Certainly," he had nodded his head as they complained that the rooms were cold, and far, far too chilly for June. The kind of coldness, they said, that no amount of head could ever penetrate. And also —they groped for the words to explain the mood—it had a queer, dispiriting effect upon them.

"Certainly," he had continued to nod as they said they would be happier away from the place. Naturally, if people reconsider their finances, they do not wish to tell strangers they have made an expensive mistake. Mr. Conroy graciously accepted their apologies plus a full month's rent, and hung out the sign again. He waited, but not for long.

It was, in fact, only a matter of hours before people began to crowd his office, compete for his favor. He finally decided upon a large woman with a determined mouth who wore her mink cape with a casualness only the very rich can afford. A mink cape, he deduced, usually suggests ability to pay.

But it did not, could not, provide the necessary warmth against a deep, soul-embalming chill. In a few days, she too was gone.

"This nonsense has gone too far," Mr. Conroy said to himself. Bitten wtih curiosity, however, he had visited the apartment for the first time. It was an ineffably lovely place. Cool yes, but it was a relaxing, inviting coolness.

And now here was this pair who looked as if they could appreciate a fine thing.

He put on his hat and joined them.

"All righty, my car is out front," he said.

A few minutes later, they entered the white building, stepped into the grilled self-service elevator and rose to the nineteenth floor. Mr. Conroy fitted a key into a door set among mirrored panels. He swung the door wide and turned with an arch smile and a flourishing bow.

"Enter, Madame."

He stood by quietly as he watched the impact of the perfection within expressed on their faces. The woman moved slowly about, her lips trembling. She touched pieces of china, ran her hands over the velvet draperies, caressed the brocaded silk chairs and sank into the yielding sofa.

"Oh, Timothy." She extended her arms, and against the shadows her hands seemed like pale, carved bits of fluted china.

"Like it?" Mr. Conroy asked softly.

The man leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Whatever you wish,

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Kendreth." She rested her face against his shoulder. "Yes, Timothy, this is home."

The renting agent cleared his throat. "Let me show you the rest of the apartment." He strode to the windows and drew apart the drapes. Tiny lances of sunlight pierced the semi-darkness and glittered on the silver candlesticks.

"There is a wonderful view of the river from the balcony." He danced up three steps and walked out onto the flagged terrace. After a moment the man and the woman joined him. They leaned against the parapet and gazed out into the distance.

"The river looks so blue from here," the woman said. Mr. Conroy hopped about impatiently. Her husband grinned at his wife. "Come, dear, we're keeping Mr. Conroy from his appointed rounds."

"Thank you," Mr. Conroy said. "Let me show you the bathroom. It's simply—" he shook his head and pursed his lips expressively—"it's simply the last word in bathrooms."

They followed him languidly back across the living room, and through the hallway. He flung open the bathroom door and flicked up the switch.

"See, a plexiglass shower compartment, a separate dressing alcove for m'lady. Everything you could possibly wish for in a bathroom." He sighed in admiration.

"Wonderful," the man said. "The acoustics are good too. Do you sing in the shower, Mr. Conroy?"

Mr. Conroy hesitated, glancing at the woman. "I take baths." He quickly opened an adjoining door and stepped aside to let them enter.

"The bedroom. Cross ventilation, plenty of closet space. Angora rugs."

"Lovely," the woman sighed.

"And the kitchen. Ah, what a kitchen." In his enthusiasm, he almost pushed them aside rudely. He apologized with a distracted murmur and scampered away.

"Here you are, sir. If you wish to dabble in recipes, you can mess about to your heart's content. This kitchen, Madame, is a cook's delight."

"A splendid arrangement," the man agreed. They returned to the living room.

"Well—what do you think?" Mr. Conroy asked, fearing an inevitable question. It came.

The woman leaned forward, a puzzled expression on her face. "Tell us, Mr. Conroy, why hasn't this beautiful apartment been rented?"

A confession bubbled on Mr. Conroy's tongue, but he suppressed it. Besides, it wasn't chilly here at all. It was warm, fragrant, a tribute to the senses.

"My dear," he lied, "you are the first, the very first to have the opportunity to take this place since it became vacant. Many people have wanted it, but I felt it would be better to wait until the proper in-

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habitants came along. You two, I feel, seem to belong here."

"Why, thank you, that is indeed a compliment." The woman rose and stood before the fireplace. It should be lit, Mr. Conroy thought, and was suddenly aware of an insidious coldness that seemed to curl around him. He shivered. A moment ago it had been so pleasant here. He looked at the others and hesitated, wondering if he should share his feelings with them. But the chill was insistent and froze out all business consideration. And his hands felt clammy.

"Do you feel cold?" he asked.

"Why, no." The woman leaned toward him, her voice flowing from sweet, smiling lips. "Not at all," her husband added. "It's cozy here."

Well then, Mr. Conroy thought, why spoil it? He stood up briskly, anxious to terminate the business, to get out into air less chill and easier to breathe.

"It's settled then?"

"Settled. We'll take it."

"Good. You have made an excellent choice." He put on his hat and walked to the door. As far as he was concerned, they were right behind him. He opened the door, held it long enough for two people to pass through, and closed it.

Inside, a gentle, disembodied feminine tinkle vibrated through the air.

"There you go, you funny little man, thinking we're still with you. We just had to come home, since there is nothing, absolutely no place to live, even out there. Darling, do you think he would have understood if we told him that the housing shortage is universal?"

"I doubt it." Her husband vibrated a yawn.

In our very next issue one of science fantasy's most brilliant writers boldly strips the veils from the most terrifying of human mysteries. SO NEAR THE DARKNESS *by* Theodore Sturgeon *is an entertainment special touched by greatness.*

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rafferty's reasons

by . . . Frederik Pohl

In that chill, cruel "Utopia" one remorseless obsession dominated Rafferty. He must kill the man who expected him to vote for Mudgins.

IT WAS THE year of all the projects, and nearly Election time. *Vote for Mudgins!* screamed the posters. *He put us back to work!*

Even Rafferty was back at work, taken off the technological dole, and he sat there in his boss' office, looking at him and hating him. Fat old John Girty, his boss. A Mudgins man from the old Fifth Precinct days, a man with the lowest phase number in the state.

"Riffraff!" Girty stormed. "A good job is wasted on a bum like you. You wish you were back on relief!"

Rafferty only nodded, his face full of misery, his heart black murder.

"Mark my words, you'll wreck the whole project!" Girty said ominously. "And when the Projects go, the Machine will come back."

Rafferty nodded again. He wasn't listening, although he appeared to be. He was watching his hand on the desk. The hand was moving, crawling slowly over the chipped plastic top like a thick-legged spider. It was crawling toward a letter opener.

"Take warning, Rafferty," said

Frederik Pohl believes this to be just about the best science fiction short story he has ever written. To agree—as we do—is to pay Mr. Pohl a very high compliment, for he has an enviable record of fine stories to his credit. They include several unusual anthologized yarns and a widely popular pocket book novel, GLADIATOR-AT-LAW, *written in collaboration with Cyril Kornbluth. The hateful John Girty of this story is an insidiously terrifying individual.*

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Girty. "You're a trouble-maker. Thank heaven I've got a few loyal workers in the Project, to tell me about skunks like you! Don't let me hear about any complaints from you again. If you don't like your job, you can quit." Of course, he couldn't, and Girty knew it. But it was a way to end the conversation, and he turned and stalked out of the room.

Rafferty sat there, watching his hand, but it was only a hand again. His hand, weak and helpless like himself, and the letter opener was only a letter opener. He got up after a while and leaned absently against the hooded computer that could have unemployed them all—if it weren't for Mudgins and his New Way. You couldn't say he was thinking, exactly, although there was a lot to think about in the silent computer under its sealed plastic cover. But he couldn't be doing that.

Not under the New Way.

It was half an hour before Rafferty opened his books again, before he dipped his pens in the red ink and the black ink and wrote down the figures. If Rafferty was capable of pride, he was proud of the way he kept the Project's books. Machines had taught him how to keep books, and even Mudgins granted that machines were useful for that sort of thing. The dark fever inside him slowly receded, and the artist that lived in Rafferty, the creator inside of every man, admired the cool neat numbers that he made.

He lived with the cool numbers all the long afternoon. (*Vote for Mudgins and the Ten-Hour Day!* the slogans said.) And they calmed him. But when the end of the day came and fat John Girty came out of his office and took down his black hat and walked out, without a smile, without a word—

Then it was that the black heat inside Rafferty surged up again, and the smoke of it bit his nostrils. Not for ten minutes did he get up to leave himself, not until all the others had gone and no one was there to see him tremble as he walked out with a look of utter desperation in his eyes.

Rafferty walked past the lines of tables, walked up the slideway, and to the far corner of the balcony before he put down his tray. All by himself he sat there, as far as he could get from the other people who were eating their Evening Issue meal. He sat down and ate what was before him, not caring what it was or how it tasted, for everything tasted alike to Rafferty. All bitter with the bitterness that is the taste of hatred.

"I hate him," Rafferty said woodenly. "I would like very much to kill him. I think it would be nice to kill him. Fat Girty, some day I will kill you."

Rafferty talked to himself, hardly making a sound, never moving his lips. It wasn't thinking out loud, because it wasn't thinking, only talking, and it was not out loud. Wherever he was, Rafferty talked

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to himself. No one heard him, no one was meant to hear him.

"I hate your lousy guts," Rafferty would say, and the man beside him would smile and bob his head and never know that Rafferty had said anything at all.

He would talk to people who weren't there. When he first went on the Projects, Rafferty thought that some day he would say those things to people. Now he knew that he would never say them to anyone but himself.

"You are a cow," Rafferty said. He was talking to Girty, who wasn't anywhere near the New Way cafeteria where the Projects personnel ate. "You say I'm a trouble-maker, when I only want them to leave me alone. You think I make mistakes with the numbers in the books. I don't. I never make mistakes when I write down numbers and add them. But you think I do."

If Girty had been there, he would have denied it—because how could Rafferty make mistakes after the machines had taught him? But Girty wasn't there, and the rest of the people around Rafferty in the cafeteria went on eating and talking and reading, except for a few as silent and solitary as Rafferty himself. None of them heard him.

Rafferty picked up the big dish and put it away from him, picked up a smaller dish and put it down in front of him, touched a fork to the soggy but vitamin-rich and expertly synthesized pie.

"Your secretary," said Rafferty in his silent voice, "she makes mistakes, though. Perhaps I should kill her too, cow."

Rafferty finished the pie and went down the stairs.

"You blame me for everything," Rafferty said, pushing silently through the crowd at the coffee-beverage urn. He put a Project-slug in the slot and held the lever down while his cup filled with three streams of fluid, one black, one white, one colorless. "You don't treat me right, cow," he said, and turned away.

A man jostled him and scalding pain ran up Rafferty's wrist as the hot drink slopped over.

Rafferty turned to him slowly. "You are a filthy pig," he said voicelessly, smiling. "Your mother walked the streets."

The man muttered, "Sorry," over his shoulder.

Rafferty sat down at another table with a party of three young Project girls who never looked at him, but talked loudly among themselves.

"I'll kill you, Girty," Rafferty said, as he stirred the coffee-beverage and drank it.

"I'll kill you, Girty," he said, and went home to his dormitory bed.

JOHN GIRTY said peevishly: "I want you all to try to act like human beings this morning. We have an important visitor from Phase Four."

The Project nodded respectfully

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and buckled down to work and when the important visitor arrived and stood with Girty, looking over the busy room, not even Rafferty looked up.

But the visitor looked at Rafferty, and said something in an undertone to Girty. "Oh, well, of course," said Girty. "We get all kinds here. That one has a bad record. He was some kind of an artist, or picture painter, or something like that under the Old Way. They take a lot of work, those marginal ones, and, as you see, they're likely to turn out sullen."

The visitor said something again and Girty laughed. "*He* might not like it," he said with heavy, angry humor. "Heaven help us all if we ran this Project the way *he* likes. But come on into my private office. You'll be interested in our overtime schedule—"

They were gone, and Girty was right, Rafferty did not resent the way they talked about him, no more than St. Lawrence, roasting on his grid, would have resented a sneering word from his torturers. Rafferty hadn't the scope left to resent small injuries.

The electronic call-me-up whispered on old Miss Sandburg's desk, and she limped into Girty's office, clutching her stenographer's pad as though it might bite. She was a sour one too, for all she was second in command of the Project office. She had been a wife and a mother once, and they said that she didn't really *want* to work. But she worked, of course.

Rafferty sat hunched over his books, looking at John Girty's door without turning his head. He saw old Ellen Sandburg go in, and saw her come out again ten minutes later, with the spider-web lines sharper around her eyes, and the white lips pressed hard together. "You are a slave," Rafferty said without a sound. "You let him bully you because you like to be a slave. But I don't."

But he was working with the cool numbers then, and he lost himself. The zeroes and fives and decimals moved in orderly progression, and there was no hate in them, nothing but chill straightness that never changed.

Only at three o'clock in the afternoon, when he had to take the Saturday payroll into fat John Girty's office to be checked and verified, did the coolness fall away and leave him burning. "I won't kiss your foot," said Rafferty, and opened the door without knocking. "I'm as good as you are, cow," said Rafferty, and dumped the carton of pay envelopes silently on Girty's desk.

But Girty hardly looked at him, only grunted with his fat, angry cow's grunt and thumbed irritably through the envelopes. But when Rafferty went back to his desk the numbers would not go right. They were hot red and smoldering black, and they swirled and bloated before his stinging eyes. He sat there

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and watched them swirl and swell as fat as fat John Girty. He just sat there, Rafferty did, holding his pen over the ledger, moving his fingers as though he were writing, but never touching pen to paper until five o'clock, early Saturday quitting time.

Then fat John Girty came out of his office and dumped the pay envelopes on Rafferty's desk again, and took his hat and left. The clerks and the girls put away their papers, and took their coats from where they had hidden them behind the sheeted bookkeeping machines and lined up before Rafferty's desk to get their pay.

"The Project pays you to work, not to collect money." That was what Girty said. "On the Project's time you work. You get paid on your own time. You get off early on Saturdays anyhow."

It wasn't fair. But all Rafferty could do when Girty went out of the office was to stare after him for a second, with his own hot, black heart showing in his eyes, and try to rush through handing out the payroll.

"You're a coward, Girty," he said without a sound, and handed a fat yellow envelope of Project-vouchers and Project-slugs to Ellen Sandburg.

"You know that I hate your guts, so you run away," he said. "But it won't help you, cow. You can run away. But I can catch you."

FIFTEEN minutes start John Girty had. No more. But it took Rafferty over an hour to make it up. An hour of looking in all the expensive, free-market restaurants where Girty might be, pressing his forehead against the glass like an urchin on Christmas day, only with the blackness coming out of no urchin's eyes.

The streets were packed, and crowds bumped against Rafferty, some careless and impolite, some doddering and apologetic, and once or twice a man as bleak and frozen as Rafferty himself.

It was week-end going-out night, and every street corner had its Mudgins Demonstrator on his flag-draped platform, frightening the passers-by with prophecies of the return of Unemployment and the Machine. Rafferty noticed that he was hungry, but he didn't have time to eat, not while he was looking for Fat John Girty and while the letter opener was secretly fondled in his pocket.

And then at the end of the search, to see John Girty just as he was coming out of the biggest free-market restaurant of all and get into a taxicab. A taxicab, that cost real money. And there was Rafferty, with two dollar bills of real money in his pocket, hoarded over months, and a pocketful of Project-vouchers and Project-slugs.

He did it. He took another cab to follow Girty, but he sat with his heart in his mouth behind the cab driver, watching the clicking black numbers on the meter and doing

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something that was close to praying. But of course it wasn't really praying, under the New Way.

Rafferty snarled voiceless curses at the cab driver, who had looked so openly suspicious of his Project suit and his panther's eyes, and so contemptuous of Rafferty's fumbling directions as he tried to keep them on the trail of the fat man in the cab ahead.

"I ought to kill you too," Rafferty told the driver, but silently. "I ought to cut your throat the way I'm going to cut the fat cow's throat with what I have hidden here."

The driver sat on his little bucket seat, where they had ripped out the automatic control apparatus to make room for a human driver under the New Way, and never knew that murder was right behind him. But it was only a short ride—fortunately for Rafferty's two dollars. The meter said forty cents.

"I ought to kill you," Rafferty said again, not looking at the driver who was fumbling for change but staring at the enormous white Old Way building Girty had gone into. "You deserve to be killed. I'll give you a tip, and you'll go and tell the Mudgins police that I'm following Girty to cut his throat. Take my money and tell the police, that's what you'll do." He picked up the half dollar from the driver's palm and left the dime. "I ought to kill you too."

But the driver couldn't tell them what he didn't know, so Rafferty bought a newspaper at a stand and stood looking at the headlines obstinately until he heard the cab drive away. The headlines on the news stories said *Liquidation of 80,000 Wilfully Unemployed* and *Legislators Hail Mudgins Way* and *Project Kitchens to Get New Wonder Yeast Meal,* but it had been a long time since Rafferty had read even a headline in a newspaper, and he didn't read them now. He only looked at them unseeing until the cab was gone, and then he looked up at the big white building. It was a Turkish bath.

"Fat old cow," Rafferty laughed silently. "So fat you go to a place like this to die."

Rafferty tore the newspaper in half and threw it on the street, and then he went in, one hand on the thing in his pocket, although the man in the lobby looked at him oddly.

He had to pay a dollar, real money, to get in, and that left him with forty-five cents and the Project-vouchers, the useless Project-vouchers that they wouldn't take in a free-market place like this. But he didn't need even forty-five cents, not for what he had in mind.

But there was a problem. He had to put all his clothes in a locker, all of them. He stood there naked, a lean, bent man with panther's eyes, wishing he had a pocket. But there was no pocket in his skin, and he had to leave the long, sharp letter opener in the locker.

Once upon a time, it seemed to Rafferty, a long, long time ago,

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someone who *then* had been that which was Rafferty *now* had been in a place like this. That was during what they called the "Old Way," although, it seemed to Rafferty, they hadn't called it that then. There was something there that did not add up neatly in his mind, but he was walking through a hot, steamy corridor of tile, and he didn't bother about that any more. It was damp underfoot, and there were splashing showers alongside. He stepped into a shower and let the water thunder on him.

And he turned his face up into the stream and cowered back, out of sight, as fat old John Girty puffed pinkly past.

Girty was naked as a newborn, soft as a moulted crab, flabby as a pink harem eunuch. "I spit," Rafferty soundlessly told the roaring water. "Fat, soft thing. You're dirty, cow.

"Fat and dirty—

"I'll kill you, Girty."

RAFFERTY stood in the steam room, peering across the corridor at the massage tables where fat Girty was presenting his flabby pink flesh to be thumped. Rafferty couldn't see through the clouded glass and so he had to keep opening the door, and every time he opened it steam billowed out and drafts knifed in on the men who sat naked on wooden benches in the steam. The metal door burned Rafferty's hand, he noticed, but it was a cool thing compared to the black heat that stung his throat inside him.

Girty was still waddling and puffing around the massage table, talking to the rubber. Rafferty let the door to the steam room close on him, and squinted around the little cube of hell he was in. There were dim loose shapes sprawled around the walls. Some were fat and many were old, but none was as flabby as John Girty.

There were three lights on the wall of the steam room, head high, candle pale. There was a fourth light that was burned out, and Rafferty sat down in the little dark under it, waiting until it was time.

"I have a knife to kill you with," he crooned soundlessly. "Fat cow. I have a knife to cut you with and stab you with. I'll kill you, Girty."

Rafferty sat there with patient violence, like an avalanche waiting on cue in the wings of a spectacular drama. He was in no hurry; he might perhaps move very fast indeed, fast as lightning or the star rays that shoot across the void, but he would not be hurrying.

There was no time for such as Rafferty, and no longing for waiting to come to an end, and no regret for time lost. Though perhaps there once had been, before Mudgins, and the New Way, and the machines that taught Rafferty and those like Rafferty how to do the work of machines.

It was time to look out the door again, and he got up, squinting his white-hot eyes against the steam,

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and walked over. In the massage room Girty was on the table now, with a white towel over his ugliness. A tall, brown man in trunks clapped goggles to Girty's eyes and pressed a switch that lit a shimmering violet light overhead.

"Close the door, damn it!" One of the dim white shapes behind Rafferty was sitting up and swearing at him.

"Your mother loved hogs," Rafferty said without voice, but he closed the door and walked out.

This was the part that was hard to do. He walked backward and sidewise like a crab, keeping his face hidden from even the closed, goggled eyes of Girty. He climbed onto a slab next to Girty and lay down with his head turned away.

"Put goggles on me, you filthy pig," he soundlessly ordered the rubber. "Hide my face before Girty looks this way." His averted eyes saw a sign on the wall:

Swedish Rub	$1.00
Salt Rub	.75
Sun Lamp & Massage	1.50

Rafferty had a twenty-five-cent-piece and two dimes. And the Project-vouchers, of course, but not for here. The rubber came, then, and covered Rafferty. He looked at him thoughtfully for a moment before he spoke, but all he said was:

"Good evening, sir. Swedish rub today?"

Rafferty nodded, looking expressionlessly into the rubber's coarse, tanned face. He could not speak out loud, so close to Girty's fat but listening ears, but he only had to nod. "Anything, filthy pig," he said soundlessly. "One dollar is nothing. Perhaps I will pay you with the same knife I pay Girty with."

The rubber assembled his greases and cloths and Rafferty waited until it was time. He thought about the one dollar of real money that someone in this place would expect him to pay, but of course he would have paid all his bills in full, for ever, before he came to the cashier's window again. He thought of the letter opener, lost to him in the locker down below. But the knife was better, eight inches long and carefully honed, with a thin blade that would slash a throat or go between two ribs.

"It will make meat out of Girty," he told the unhearing rubber. "Perhaps it will make meat out of you. I know it will make meat out of me, too, but not until I have finished with fat Girty."

It was good that the knife was there, to solve all his problems at once. He waited until it was time.

Girty's lamp went out, and his rubber rolled him over, and Girty immediately began talking to the man. Rafferty could hear the hard-muscled cupped-hand slaps on the sagging pink flesh, and Girty's wheezing, jolting voice. "I'll kill you, Girty," he said, and it was like a hymn. "I'll kill you, Girty," he said without sound.

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Girty was saying proudly, "Hell, I've—*ugh*—worked with Mudgins just like—*ugh*—that. Ever since the old Fifth—*ugh*—Precinct days. He and I—"

Rafferty wasn't listening, not exactly. He was letting the words flow over him as unnoticed as his rubber's attentions, waiting for it to be time. There would be some sort of signal, it seemed to him, and then he would make meat out of Girty.

Not exactly listening, he caught a sudden change in Girty's voice and for a second he tensed, thinking perhaps it was the signal. "Easy, sir," said his rubber, thinking he had hit a sore spot.

But Rafferty didn't relax until he realized that the change in Girty's voice was because he was greeting a friend. Rafferty peered and saw another man, as pink as Girty but nothing like as fat, as old but not nearly as flabby, advancing as bare as a baby and talking to Girty.

"Lay down with dogs, you fool," said Rafferty venomously, not making a sound, "and you get up with fleas. I warn you, Girty-lover. I'll kill you too, with a knife that will hack your heart out before you even see it. Cows."

Rafferty's rubber flopped him over then, and for a plunging moment it seemed to Rafferty the man would surely see the knife. But he didn't say anything, only: "Easy, sir. Let me know if I'm too brisk."

Rafferty lay face down on the slab, watching his fingers crawl across the cloth beside his face. "The hands can kill you, Girty," he said voicelessly. "But the knife is better. Go and run, with your Girty-loving friend. Wherever you go, I'll be there."

They were talking, Girty and the Girty-lover, and Rafferty reached out to taste the conversation. The friend was complaining, while another masseur eased the kinks out of his shoulders. The friend was saying, "Sixty hours? That's a good long work week, yes. And it keeps them out of trouble, I'm not denying it. But there's a fatigue factor, John. After sixty hours a worker is bound to make mistakes."

Girty said: "Not if he's been disciplined. Give them the New Way treatment, that's all." He laughed, like a pig's squeal. "I'd like to see them make mistakes then."

His friend said: "I don't hold with the treatments."

Girty said, after a moment, in a voice that was still a cow's voice, but the voice of a shocked and stern cow: *"Are you against Mudgins?"*

Rafferty stopped feeling the texture of the conversation then, because what did it matter to him? The Girty-lover was defensive and over-emphatic, and Girty himself was hostile and only slowly allowed himself to be soothed. They were talking about full employment and the horrors of the Old Way and the Machine, and the Girty-lover was petulantly insisting that the machine-education treatments had—unspecified—faults.

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Rafferty didn't listen. The New Way treatments were machines droning and flashing in your ears and hammering, hammering, hammering at you until you *couldn't* make a mistake, not in the things they taught you to do. Because you were half machine yourself, by the time they finished fluxing and forging your mind. And full employment was overtime at the Project and an end to the—the studio, or whatever that word was, that once had meant something back in the days of the Machine and—and Art, whatever *that* word was.

But what did it matter to Rafferty, that he should listen? Better to lie there with the secret knowledge of eight inches of honed steel, waiting.

John Girty was saying in his hoarse cow's rumble, "I tell you, Mudgins *saved* us from going to hell in a handbasket! You don't remember the Old Way. Love. Churches. And crackpots making speeches—about *anything*. Voting—for anybody, anybody you liked. Mudgins cleaned all that up. 'Keep them busy,' he said, 'and you'll keep them out of trouble.' Get rid of the Machine, put people back to work. If they don't want to work the way they ought to—*make* them! I remember, back in the Fifth—"

Rafferty wasn't listening, not exactly, but the words were fuel to keep him going. But the rubber was through with him, and flopped him right-side-up again, and again there was that moment when the universe stopped, waiting to see if the man would see the knife.

The rubber said cheerfully, "There you are, sir. That'll fix you up. Now how about a little suntan to tone up the skin?" His hand was already on the switch, and the tube overhead flared violet. Rafferty stared ragingly at it through his goggles, hating the darkened, shapeless core of the light.

Girty's oration broke off: "—but that's the way Mudgins always—Hey. Say, excuse me, but— *Hey.*"

Rafferty froze. From the corner of his eye he saw John Girty ponderously pushing himself up on one flabby arm, staring at him with doubt in the wrinkled little eyes. Near-sighted Girty—but he had recognized Rafferty!

It was the moment of the knife. Quite slowly Rafferty lowered his legs to the floor. "Dirty cow," he said soundlessly. He felt the knife, keen and ruthless in his hand. Eight slim inches to kill with. "Dirty, dirty, dirty," he chanted—but it was not soundlessly. "Dirty, dirty, I'll kill you, Girty." It was loud now, his own voice.

Oh, they tried to stop him. He could have laughed at that, if he had remembered how. Try to stop Rafferty, with an eight-inch killing knife! They were all shrieking and yowling and running about at once, and they grabbed at him, but he brushed them off like the staining soot of the air. And they got in his way, but it cost them. He hack-

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ed and stabbed and sliced and slew.

He was a Spartacus, and a Lizzie Borden, swordsman and butcher. He stabbed every one of them to the heart and ripped them up and down, and for the first time in longer than he could know, Rafferty was Rafferty, *Mister* Rafferty, a man who had once been a human being and, God save the mark, an artist, and not a mere flesh ersatz for a bookkeeping machine. Kill and slice and tear! They overturned furniture, squealing and thundering, like a trapped horse kicking at the flaming, booming walls of its stall. But he killed them all, many times, this Rafferty who was Spartacus and Lizzie Borden—

And, at the last, a warrior of the Samurai as well.

When he had killed them enough to slake the fever, he killed himself. Into the pit of the stomach and up. He felt the blade slide and slice, too sharp to tear, a warrior's weapon. The eight-inch steel made cat's meat of his bowels and heart and lungs. Rafferty felt himself dying, but it was worth it, it was worth it, it was worth everything in the world . . .

After he committed suicide, he sat there and watched his victims running about. It was several seconds before he noticed that he wasn't dead.

GIRTY's friend demanded: "Do you still think the machine treatments are good?"

Girty said: "Ow. The ugly son beat me black and blue." He rubbed his bruised pink paunch, staring at the door where they had carried Rafferty out, weeping.

"You're lucky," said Girty's friend. "Suppose he really had a knife, instead of that old cigar butt he picked up. Suppose somebody else on your Project cracks up, only this one gets a gun somewhere."

Girty said petulantly, "Where would anybody get a gun these days?" He was getting his breath back, and his nerve.

"Suppose he did," his friend insisted.

Girty said truculently: "Watch yourself. I don't stand for anti-New Way talk. So Rafferty cracked up. I knew he was a weak one. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, and what's it to me if somebody like Rafferty gets broken?"

He measured his words carefully. "People like Rafferty are trouble-makers, they don't want to work, they don't want full employment. They liked the soft, rotting life under the Old Way and the Machine. If you don't give them treatments, they'll make trouble now. Sure, some of them crack up—like sometimes you put a casting in the press and it cracks, because it's brittle. Worthless. Mudgins knows what to do with the worthless ones. Make them fit, or break them."

"But I don't like Mudgins and his treatments," Girty's friend said violently . . . but not out loud. He

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sat up, wonderingly. He wasn't in the habit of talking to himself and he wondered if other people ever talked like that to themselves.

Girty, unhearing, was brooding: "You'd think even a piece of trash like Rafferty would want to be *part* of something. Why wouldn't he? But no, he has to work up some crazy resentment—try to kill me. Why? What reason could he have?"

Girty's friend could not give him the answer, though he might have had suspicions. Mudgins could have answered him, and a few others around Mudgins or elsewhere. A few in high places who didn't need even touch-up courses under the machines, could have told him Rafferty's reasons. But only a few. The others, the many, many millions, they could never say what the reasons were; because some of them had never known them, and some had had to forget.

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hawks over shem

by . . . Robert E. Howard and L. Sprague de Camp

Nothing could silence the scorn of Conan's laughter ringing free. For the day of the hawks was his greatest day under the flaming sun.

THE TALL figure in the white cloak wheeled, cursing angrily, his hand at his scimitar hilt. Not lightly did men walk the nighted streets of Asgalun, capital of Shemitish Pelishtiya, for in the deserted wharfsheds and the dark, winding alleys of its unsavory river quarter, anything might happen.

"Why do you follow me, dog?" he demanded. His voice was harsh, the Shemitic gutturals heavy with the accents of Hyrkania.

Instantly another tall figure emerged from the shadows. He was clad, as was the first, in a cloak of white silk, but unlike the man who had challenged him he was bare-kneed and bare-headed.

"I do not follow you!" The accent was different from the Hyrkanian's. "Cannot a stranger walk the streets without being insulted by every clumsy drunkard?"

The two glared at each other, each gripping his hilt with a hand tense with passion.

"I have been followed since nightfall," accused the Hyrkanian. "I have heard stealthy footsteps

So stalwart a warrior is CONAN THE BARBARIAN, *so fierce in battle and so everlastingly vital that his supremacy remains unchallenged in the entire wide sweep of fantastic literature. And we doubt if any writer of fantasy-adventure yarns ever penned his tales with more zest, exuberance and meticulous attention to exotic detail than the late, great Robert E. Howard. Enhance those talents with the witty, lively satire of a Sprague de Camp, and the collaboration which emerges is bound to be one of those unusual reading events which happen once or twice in a lifetime. We make no attempt to conceal our pride in this story.*

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along each of these alleys. Now you come unexpectedly into view, in a place most suited for murder!"

"Ishtar confound you!" said the other. "Why should I follow you? I have lost my way. I have never seen you before, and I hope never to see you again, you Hyrkanian dog!"

"Insolent swine!" cried the Hyrkanian in a gust of anger, unsheathing his scimitar.

Then a stealthy pad of feet brought him round, springing back and wheeling to keep both the stranger and the newcomers before him. But the other man had drawn his own saber and was glaring past him.

Three huge figures loomed formidably in the shadows, the dim starlight glinting on the curved blades of their upraised weapons. There was also a glimmer of white teeth and eyeballs against dark skins.

For an instant there was tense stillness. Then one of the newcomers demanded in the liquid speech of the Kushites of the black kingdoms: "Which is our dog? Here be two clad alike, and the darkness makes them twins."

"Cut both down," replied another, who towered half a head above his huge companions. "We shall then make no mistake and leave no witnesses."

So saying, the three Kushites came on in deadly silence, the giant advancing on the stranger, the other two on the Hyrkanian.

The stranger did not await the attack. With a resounding oath he ran at the approaching colossus and slashed furiously at his head. The giant caught the stroke on his uplifted blade and grunted beneath the impact. The next instant, with a crafty twist and a wrench, he had locked his opponent's blade under his guard and torn the weapon from his hand. As it fell ringing on the stones a searing curse ripped from the stranger's lips.

But even as the giant swept his broad scimitar aloft, the stranger sprang in under his lifted arm and drove his poniard to the hilt in the other's chest. Blood spurted along the stranger's wrist, and as he leapt back the scimitar fell waveringly, to cut through his silken kaffiyeh and glance from the steel cap beneath. With an anguished groan the giant sank to the ground.

The stranger caught up his saber and turned to stare at the Hyrkanian, who was parrying the attack of the two remaining Kushites coolly, retreating slowly to keep them in front of him. He suddenly slashed one across the breast and shoulder, so that he also dropped his sword and fell to his knees with a moan. As he fell he gripped the Hyrkanian's knees and hung on like a leech.

The Hyrkanian kicked and struggled in vain. The black arms, bulging with iron muscles, held him fast, while the surviving Kushite redoubled the fury of his strokes.

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Even as the Kushite swordsman drew breath for a stroke that the hampered Hyrkanian could not have parried, he heard the rush of feet behind him. Before he could turn, the stranger's saber drove through him with such fury that the blade sprang half its length out of his breast, while the hilt smote him fiercely between the shoulders. Life went out of him with an inarticulate cry.

The Hyrkanian caved in the skull of his other antagonist with his hilt and shook himself free of the corpse. He turned to the stranger, who was pulling his saber out of the twitching body it had transfixed.

"Why did you come to my aid?" he inquired.

The other shrugged. "We were two men beset by rogues. Fate made us allies. Now, if you wish, we will take up our quarrel again. You said I spied upon you."

"I see my mistake and crave your pardon," answered the Hyrkanian promptly. "I know now who has been skulking after me."

He wiped and sheathed his scimitar and bent over each corpse in turn. When he came to the body of the giant slain by the stranger's poniard, he paused and murmured: "Soho! It's Keluka the Sworder! Of high rank this archer whose shaft is panelled with pearls!"

He wrenched from the limp finger a heavy, ornate ring, slipped it into his sash, and laid hold on the garments of the dead man. "Help me to dispose of this carion, brother, so that no questions shall be asked."

The stranger grasped a blood-stained jacket in each hand and dragged the other two bodies after the Hyrkanian down a reeking dark alley, in which rose the broken curb of a ruined and forgotten well. The corpses plunged into the abyss and struck far below with sullen splashes. With a light laugh the Hyrkanian turned.

"The gods have made us allies," he said. "I owe you a debt."

"You owe me nought," answered the other in a surly tone.

"Words cannot level a mountain. I am Farouz, an archer of Xayarsha's Hyrkanian horse. Come with me to a more seemly spot, where we can converse in comfort."

The stranger sheathed his saber grudgingly and followed the Hyrkanian. Their way led through the gloom of reeking alleys and along narrow winding streets. Asgalun was an amalgam of splendor and decay, where opulent palaces rose among the smoke-stained ruins of buildings of the remote past. A swarm of suburbs clustered about the walls of the forbidden inner city where dwelt King Akhîrom and his nobles.

The two men came to a newer and more respectable quarter, where the latticed windows of overhanging balconies almost touched one another across the street.

"All the shops are dark," grunted the stranger. "I cannot under-

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stand it. A few days ago the city was lighted like day, from dusk to sunrise."

The Hyrkanian nodded, then explained with a shrug: "One of Akhîrom's whims. Now he has another, that no lights shall burn in Asgalun. What his mood will be tomorrow, Melek-Qarth only knows."

They halted before an iron-bound door in a heavy stone arch, and the Hyrkanian rapped cautiously. A voice challenged from within and was answered by a password. The door was opened, and Farouz pushed into thick darkness, drawing his companion with him. The door closed behind them. A heavy leather curtain was pulled back, revealing a lamp-lit corridor and a scarred old Shemite.

"An old soldier turned to wine-selling," said the Hyrkanian. "Lead us to a chamber where we can be alone, Khannon."

"Most of the chambers are empty," grumbled Khannon, limping before them. "I'm a ruined man. Men fear to touch the cup, since the king banned wine. May Melek-Qarth smite him with gout!"

The stranger glanced curiously into the larger chambers adjoining both sides of the corridor, where men sat at food and drink. Most of Khannon's customers were typical Pelishtim—stocky, swarthy men with hooked noses and curly blue-black beards. Occasionally one saw men of the more slender type that roamed the deserts of eastern Shem, or Hyrkanians or black Kushites from the mercenary army of Pelishtiya.

Khannon bowed the two men into a small room where he spread mats for them. Then he set before them a great dish of fruits and nuts, poured wine from a bulging skin, and limped away muttering.

"Pelishtiya has come upon evil days, brother," drawled the Hyrkanian, quaffing the wine of Kyros. He was a tall man, leanly but strongly built. Keen black eyes, slightly aslant, danced restlessly in a face with a yellowish tinge. His hawk-nose overhung a thin black mustache. His plain cloak was of costly fabric, his spired helmet was chased with silver, and jewels glittered in the hilt of his scimitar.

Farouz looked at a man as tall as himself, but who contrasted with him in many ways. The other had thicker limbs and greater depth of chest: the build of a mountaineer. Under his white kaffiyeh his brown face, youthful but already seamed with the scars of brawls and battles, showed smooth-shaven. His natural complexion was lighter than that of the Hyrkanian, the darkness of his features being more of the sun than of nature. A hint of stormy fires smoldered in his cold blue eyes. He gulped his wine and smacked his lips in appreciation.

Farouz grinned and refilled his goblet. "You fight well, brother. If Xayarsha's Hyrkanians were not so

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infernally jealous of outsiders, you'd make a good trooper."

The other merely grunted.

"Who are you, anyway?" persisted Farouz. "I've told you who I am."

"I am Ishbaq, a Zuagir from the eastern deserts."

The Hyrkanian threw back his head and laughed loudly, bringing a scowl to the face of the other man, who said: "What is so funny about that?"

"Do you expect me to believe you?"

"Do you say I lie?" snarled the stranger.

Farouz grinned. "No Zuagir ever spoke Pelishtic with an accent like yours, for the Zuagir tongue is but a dialect of Shemitish, no more different from Pelishtic than the speech of us eastern Hyrkanians is from that of Turan. Moreover during our fight with the Kushites you called upon strange gods—Crom and Manannan—whose names I have heard before from the barbarians of the north and west. But do not be concerned. I am in your debt and can keep a secret."

The stranger half started up, grasping his hilt. Farouz merely smiled and took a sip of wine. After an instant of almost ominous tension the stranger sank back and acknowledged with an air of discomfiture:

"Very well. I am Conan, a Cimmerian, late of the army of King Sumuabi of Akkhariya."

The Hyrkanian grinned and stuffed grapes into his mouth. Between mastications he said: "You could never be a spy, friend Conan: You are too quick and open in your anger. What brings you to Asgalun?"

"A little matter of revenge."

"Who is your enemy?"

"An Anaki named Othbaal," said Conan, "may the dogs gnaw his bones!"

Farouz whistled. "By Melek-Qarth, you aim at a lofty target! Are you not aware that this man is a general of all King Akhîrom's Anakian troops?"

"Crom! It matters as little to me as if he were a collector of offal."

"What has Othbaal done to you?"

Conan said: "The people of Anakiya revolted against their king, who's an even bigger fool than Akhîrom. They asked aid of Akkhariya. Sumuabi hoped they would succeed and choose a friendlier king than the one in power, so he called for volunteers. Five hundred of us marched to help the Anakim. But this accursed Othbaal had been playing both sides. He led the revolt to encourage the king's enemies to come out into the open, and then betrayed the rebels into the arms of the king, who butchered the lot.

"Othbaal also knew we were coming, so he set a trap for us, and, ignorant of what had happened, we fell into it. Only I escaped with my life, and that by shamming death. The rest of us either fell on

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the field, or were put to death with the fanciest tortures the king's Sabatean torturer could devise."

The moody blue eyes narrowed. "I've fought men before this and thought no worse of them afterwards, but in this case I swore I'd pay back Othbaal for his perfidy. When I got back to Akkhariya I learned that he had fled from Anakiya for fear of the people and had come here. How has he risen so high so quickly?"

"He is a cousin or something of King Akhîrom," said Farouz. "Akhîrom, though a Pelisti, is also a cousin of the king of Anakiya and was brought up at that court. The kings of these little Shemitish city-states are all more or less related, which makes their wars all quarrels within the family and all the more bitter in consequence. How long have you been in Asgalun?"

"Only a few days. Long enough to learn that the king is mad. No wine indeed!" Conan spat.

"There is more to learn," said Farouz. "Akhîrom is indeed mad, and the people murmur under his heel. He holds his power by means of three bodies of mercenary troops, with whose aid he overthrew and slew his brother, the previous king: First, the Anakim, whom he recruited while an exile at the court of his cousin the king of Anakiya. Secondly, the black Kushites, who under their General Imbalayo yearly gain more power. And thirdly, the Hyrkanian horse, like myself. Their general is Xayarsha, and among him and Imbalayo and Othbaal there is enough hatred and jealousy to have started a dozen wars.

Farouz paused an instant, then went on: "Othbaal came here last year as a penniless adventurer. He has risen partly by his relationship to Akhîrom, and partly by the machinations of an Ophirean slave-woman named Rufia, whom he won at gaming from Xayarsha and then refused to return when the Hyrkanian had sobered up, which is another reason for there being little love between them. There is a woman behind Akhîrom, too. She is Zeriti the Stygian, a dangerous witch. Men say that she has driven him mad by the potions she has fed him to keep him under her governance. If that's true, then she defeated her own ends, for now *nobody* can control him."

Conan set down his goblet and looked straight at Farouz. "Well, what now? Will you betray me to the Anakim, or did you speak truth when you said you'd keep my secret?"

Turning in his fingers the ring he had taken from Keluka, Farouz mused: "I, too, owe Othbaal a heavy debt. I'll do more than keep your secret. I will aid you in your vengeance! For months I have been looking for some outsider whom I could trust in this enterprise."

Conan started forward, his iron fingers gripping the Hyrkanian's

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shoulder. "Do you speak the truth?"

"Let these potbellied Shemitish gods smite me if I lie! Listen to me carefully now . . ."

II

LATER, two hooded figures halted in a group of palms among the ruins of Asgalun. Before them lay the waters of a canal, and beyond it, rising from its bank, the great bastioned wall of sun-dried brick which encircled the inner city. The inner city was really a gigantic fortress, sheltering the king and his trusted nobles and mercenary troops, and forbidden to common men without a pass.

"We could climb the wall," muttered Conan.

"And find ourselves no nearer our enemy," said Farouz, groping in the shadows. "Here!"

Conan saw the Hyrkanian fumbling at a shapeless heap of marble. "This is a very ancient ruined shrine," grumbled Farouz. "But perhaps—ah!"

He lifted a broad slab, revealing steps leading down into darkness. Conan frowned suspiciously.

Farouz explained: "This tunnel leads under the wall and up into the house of Othbaal, which stands just beyond."

"Under the canal?"

Farouz nodded, his expression thoughtful. "Once Othbaal's house was the pleasure-house of King Uriaz, who slept in a steel-walled chamber, guarded by tame lions—yet fell before the avenger's dagger in spite of his precautions. He prepared secret exits from all parts of his houses. Before Othbaal took the dwelling it belonged to his rival Xayarsha. The Anaki knows nothing of the secret, so come!"

With drawn swords they groped down a flight of stone steps and advanced along a level tunnel in total blackness. Conan's groping fingers told him that the walls, floor, and ceiling were composed of huge blocks of stone.

As they advanced, the stones became slippery and the air grew dank. Drops of water fell on Conan's neck, making him shiver and curse. They were passing under the canal, but after a moment the dampness abated. Farouz whispered a warning, and they mounted another flight of stairs.

At the top the Hyrkanian fumbled with a catch. A panel slid aside and a soft light streamed in. Farouz slipped through the opening and, after Conan had followed, closed it behind them.

It became one of the inlaid panels of the wall not differing to the sight from the other panels. They stood in a vaulted corridor, while Farouz pulled his kaffiyeh around to hide his face and motioned Conan to do likewise. Farouz then led the way down the corridor without hesitation. The Cimmerian followed, sword in hand, glancing to right and left.

They passed through a curtain

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of dark velvet and came upon an arched doorway of gold-inlaid ebony. A brawny black, clad only in a silken loin-cloth, started up from his doze, sprang to his feet, and almost instantly swung a great scimitar. But he did not cry out and it was easy to see why. His open mouth revealed the cavernous emptiness of the mouth of a mute.

"Do it quietly!" snapped Farouz, avoiding the sweep of the mute's sword. As the man stumbled from his wasted effort, Conan tripped him. He fell sprawling and Farouz passed his sword resolutely through the dark body.

"That was quick and silent enough!" breathed Farouz with a scowl. "Now for the real prey!"

Cautiously he tried the door, while the giant Cimmerian crouched at his shoulder, eyes burning like those of a hunting tiger. The door gave inward and they sprang into the chamber. Farouz closed the door behind them and set his back to it, laughing at the man who had leaped up from his divan with a startled oath. Beside him a woman half rose from the cushions and screamed.

Farouz said: "We've run the buck to cover, brother!"

For a fraction of a second Conan took in the spectacle. Othbaal was a tall, lusty man in the prime of life. His thick black hair was gathered in a knot at the nape of his neck and his black beard was oiled, curled, and precisely trimmed. Late as the hour was, he was fully clad in silken kilt and velvet vest, under which gleamed the links of a mail-shirt. He dived for a scabbarded sword that lay on the floor beside the couch.

As for the woman, she was not conventionally pretty but still good to look at—red-haired, with a broad, slightly freckled face, and brown eyes sparkling with intelligence.

"Help!" shouted Othbaal, rising to meet the Cimmerian's rush. "They have come to kill me!"

Farouz started across the wide floor not more than a step behind Conan. But suddenly he turned and leaped back to the door through which they had come. With half an ear Conan was aware of a commotion in the corridor outside. He heard the thump of some heavy object rammed against the door, the next instant his blade was crossing that of the Anaki. The swords clanged in mid-air, showering sparks, flashing and flickering in the lamplight.

Both men attacked almost simultaneously, smiting furiously, each too intent on the life of the other to give much thought to showy swordplay. Each stroke had full weight and murderous will behind it. They fought in tight-lipped silence.

As they circled, Conan saw, over Othbaal's shoulder, that Farouz had braced his shoulder against the door. From the other side came increasingly heavy blows, which had

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already torn the bolt loose. The woman had vanished.

"Can you deal with him?" said Farouz. "If I let this door go, his slaves will pour in."

"All right so far," grunted Conan, parrying a ferocious slash.

"Be quick, then, for I cannot hold them much longer."

Conan plunged in with fresh ferocity. Now it was the Anaki whose attention was devoted to parrying the Cimmerian's sword, which beat on his blade like a hammer on an anvil. The sheer strength and fury of the barbarian began to tell.

Othbaal paled under his swarthy skin, and his breath came in gasps as he gave ground, blood streaming from gashes on his shoulders and thighs. Conan bled too, but there was no slackening in the headlong fury of his attack.

Othbaal was close to the tapestried wall when suddenly he sprang aside, just as Conan lunged. Carried off-balance by his wasted thrust, the Cimmerian plunged forward and his sword-point clashed against the stone beneath the tapestries. At the same instant Othbaal slashed at his foe's head with all his waning power.

But the sword of Stygian steel, instead of snapping like a lesser blade, bent and sprang straight again. The descending scimitar bit through Conan's helmet into the scalp beneath. But before Othbaal could recover his balance, Conan's heavy blade sheared upward through steel links and hip-bone to grate into the man's spinal column.

The Anaki reeled and fell with a choking cry. For an instant he clawed in agony at the heavy carpet, trying desperately to rise. Then a convulsive shudder passed over him, and he went limp.

Conan, reeling with the fury of battle, was driving his sword in silent frenzy again and again into the slumped form at his feet. So drunken with blind rage was he that he failed to realize that his antagonist was dead until Farouz called out:

"Follow me, Conan! They've stopped their attack to bring up a heavier ram. We can run for it."

Dazedly Conan raked the blood from his eyes, and tore off his riven headpiece, exposing his square-cut black mane. A crimson torrent descended into his face, blinding him anew. He stooped and tore a strip from Othbaal's kilt to bind up his head.

"See that door?" cried Farouz, pointing. "Rufia fled that way, the slut! If you're ready we'll run for it."

Conan saw an inconspicuous little door to one side of the couch. It had been concealed by draperies, but Rufia in her flight had disarranged them and left the portal wide open behind her.

Farouz took from his girdle the ring that he had pulled from the finger of the killer, Keluka. He ran across the floor, dropped the ring near Othbaal's body, and con-

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tinued on toward the small door. Conan, weaving slightly, followed him, though he had to crouch and almost turn sideways to get through.

Swiftly they emerged into another corridor. Farouz led Conan by a roundabout route, turning and twisting through a maze of passages, until Conan was hopelessly lost. By this means they avoided the main body of household retainers, gathered in the corridor outside the principal entrance to the room where they had slain Othbaal.

Once they aroused feminine screams from a room they passed, but Farouz kept on. Presently they reached the secret panel, entered it, and groped in darkness until they emerged once more into the silent grove.

Conan stopped to get his breath and tighten his bandage. He said: "Why did you drop that ring?"

"To blind the avengers of blood. Khosatral! All that trouble, and the strumpet got away."

Conan grinned wryly in the darkness. Rufia evidently did not regard Farouz as a rescuer. The brief picture that Conan had obtained, in the second before he had closed with Othbaal, returned vividly to his mind. Such a woman, he thought, would suit him perfectly.

III

WITHIN the massive walls of the inner city of Asgalun a stupendous event was coming to pass. Under the shadows of the balconies stole a veiled and hooded figure. For the first time in three years a woman was defiantly walking the streets of Asgalun.

Realizing her peril, she trembled with a fear that was not inspired wholly by the lurking shadows which might well have masked skulking thieves. The stones hurt her feet in her tattered velvet slippers, which was not at all surprising. For three years the cobblers of Asgalun had been forbidden to make street-shoes for women. Indeed, King Akhîrom had decreed that the women of Pelishtiya should be shut up like reptiles in cages.

Rufia, the red-haired Ophirean, favorite of Othbaal, had wielded more power than any woman in Pelishtiya save Zeriti, the king's witch-mistress. And now, as she stole through the night, an outcast, the thought that burned her like a white-hot brand was the realization that the fruits of all her scheming had been spilt in a second by the sword-stroke of one of Othbaal's many enemies.

Rufia came of a race of women accustomed to swaying thrones with their beauty and wit. She scarcely remembered her native Ophir from which she had been stolen by Kothian slavers. The Argossean magnate who had bought her and raised her for his household had fallen in battle with the Shemites, and as a supple girl of fourteen Rufia had passed into the hands of

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a prince of Stygia, a languorous, effeminate youth whom she quickly came to twist around her pink fingers.

Then, after some years, had come the raid of a band of wandering freebooters from the barbarian-dominated lands beyond the Sea of Vilayet upon the prince's pleasure-island in the upper Styx, with slaughter, fire, and plunder, crashing walls and shrieks of death, and a red-haired girl screaming in the arms of a tall Hyrkanian chieftain.

Because she came of a race whose women were rulers of men, Rufia neither perished nor became a whimpering toy. When Xayarsha enlisted his band under Akhîrom in Anakiya, as part of Akhîrom's successful effort to seize the kingdom of Pelishtiya from his hated brother, Rufia had gone along.

She had not liked Xayarsha. The sardonic adventurer was coldly masterful in his relations with women, allowing none to command or persuade him in the slightest. Moreover he possessed a lust that no one woman, however ardent, could wholly satisfy. Because Rufia could endure no rival, she had not been displeased when Xayarsha had gambled her away to his rival Othbaal.

The Anaki was more to her taste. The man had intelligence, tremendous vitality, and strength of mind and body. He only needed a stimulant to his ambition, and Rufia had supplied that. She had started him up the shining rungs of the ladder —and now he was dead, slain by a pair of masked murderers who had sprung from nowhere.

Engrossed in her bitter thoughts, she looked up with a start as a tall hooded figure stepped from the shadows of an overhanging balcony and confronted her. A wide cloak was drawn close around him and his coif hid his features. Only his eyes burned at her, almost luminous in the starlight. She cowered back with a low cry.

"A woman on the streets of Asgalun!" The voice was hollow and ghostly. "Is this not against the king's commands?"

"I do not walk streets by choice, lord," she answered. "My master has been slain, and I fled from his murderers."

The stranger bent his hooded head and stood statue-like for an instant, his eyes regarding her somberly. Rufia watched him nervously. There was something gloomy and portentous about him. He seemed less like a man pondering the tale of a chance-met slave-girl than a stern-faced prophet weighing the doom of a sinful people. At last he lifted his head.

"Come," said he, "I will find a place for you."

Without pausing to see if she obeyed he stalked away up the street. Rufia hurried after him. She could not walk the streets all night, for any officer of the palace guard would strike off her head for violating the edict of King Akhîrom. This stranger might be lead-

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ing her into worse slavery, but she had no choice.

Several times she tried to speak to him, but his grim silence struck her silent in turn. His unnatural aloofness frightened her. Once she was startled to see furtive forms stealing after them.

"There are men following us!" she exclaimed.

"Pay them no heed," answered the man in his weird voice.

Nothing more was said until they reached a small arched gate in a lofty wall. The stranger halted and called out. He was answered from within. The gate opened, revealing a black mute holding a torch. In its light the height of the robed stranger was inhumanly exaggerated.

"But this—this is a gate of the Great Palace!" stammered Rufia.

For answer the man threw back his hood, revealing a long pale oval of a face, in which burned those strange luminous eyes.

Rufia screamed and fell to her knees. "King Akhîrom!"

"Yes, King Akhîrom, faithless and sinful one!" The hollow voice rolled out like a knell. "You were vain and foolish beyond belief to ignore the command of the Great King, the King of Kings, the King of the World, which is the word of the gods! You have walked the street in sin, and shamelessly set aside the mandates of the Good King! Seize her!"

The following shadows closed in, becoming a squad of Negro mutes. As their fingers touched her flesh, Rufia fainted.

The Ophirean regained consciousness in a windowless chamber whose arched doors were securely bolted with bars of gold. She stared wildly about for her captor and shrank down to see him standing above her, stroking his pointed graying beard while his terrible eyes burned into her soul.

"Lion of Shem!" she gasped, struggling to her knees. "Have pity upon me!"

As she spoke she knew the futility of the plea. She was crouching before the man whose name was a curse in the mouths of the Pelishtim, the man who, claiming divine guidance, had ordered all dogs killed, all vines cut down, all grapes and honey dumped into the river.

She was at the mercy of one who had banned all wine, beer, and games of chance, and believed that to disobey his most trivial command was the blackest sin conceivable. He roamed the streets at night in disguise to see that his orders were obeyed. Rufia's flesh crawled as he stared at her with wide unblinking eyes.

"Blasphemer!" he whispered. "Daughter of evil! O Melek-Qarth!" he cried, flinging up his arms. "What punishment shall be devised for this demon in human form? What agony terrible enough, what degradation vile enough to render justice? The gods grant me wisdom!"

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Rufia rose to her knees and pointed at Akhîrom's face. "Why call on the gods?" she shrieked. "Call on Akhîrom! You are yourself a god!"

He stopped, swayed, and cried out incoherently. Then he straightened, and looked down at her. Her face was white, her eyes staring. To her natural acting-ability was added the terror of her position.

"What do you see, woman?" he asked.

"A god has revealed himself to me! In your face, shining like the sun! I burn, I die in the blaze of your glory!"

She sank her face in her hands and crouched trembling. Akhîrom passed a shaking hand over his brow.

"Yes," he whispered, "I am a god! I have guessed it; I have dreamed it. I alone possess the wisdom of the infinite. Now a mortal has seen it also. I am not a mere mouthpiece and servant of the gods, but the god of gods himself! Akhîrom is the god of Pelishtiya—and of the earth. The false demon Melek-Qarth shall be cast down from his place and his statues melted up . . ."

Bending his gaze downward he ordered: "Rise, woman, and look upon thy god!"

She did so, shrinking before his awful gaze. A change clouded Akhîrom's eyes as he seemed to see her clearly for the first time.

"Your sin is pardoned," he intoned. "You were the first to hail your god. Henceforth you shall serve me in honor and splendor."

She prostrated herself, kissing the carpet before his feet. He clapped his hands. A eunuch entered and bowed.

"Go quickly to the house of Abdashtarth, the high priest of Melek-Qarth," he said, looking over the servant's head. "Say to him: 'This is the word of Akhîrom, who is the one true god of the Pelishtim, and shall soon be the god of all the peoples of the earth. On the morrow shall be the beginning of beginnings. The idols of the false Melek-Qarth shall be destroyed, and statues of the true god shall be erected in their stead. The true religion shall be proclaimed, and a sacrifice of one hundred of the noblest children of the Pelishtim shall celebrate it . . .' "

IV

BEFORE the temple of Melek-Qarth stood Mattenbaal, the first assistant to Abdashtarth. The venerable Abdashtarth, his hands tied, stood quietly in the grip of a pair of brawny Anaki soldiers. His long white beard moved as he prayed.

Behind him other soldiers stoked the fire in the base of the huge bull-headed idol of Melek-Qarth. In the background towered the great seven-storied ziggurat of Asgalun, from which the priests read the will of the gods in the stars.

When the brazen sides of the idol glowed with the heat within,

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Mattenbaal stepped forward, raised a piece of papyrus, and read:

"For that your divine king, Akhîrom, is of the seed of Yakin-Ya, who was descended from the gods when they walked the earth, so is a god this day among you! And now I command you, all loyal Pelishtim, to recognize and bow down to and worship the greatest of all gods, the god of gods, the Creator of the Universe, the Incarnation of Divine Wisdom, the king of gods, who is Akhîrom the son of Azumelek, king of Pelishtiya!

"And inasmuch as the wicked and perverse Abdashtarth, in the hardness of his heart, has rejected this revelation and has refused to bow down before his true god, let him be cast into the fire of the idol of the false Melek-Qarth!"

A soldier tugged open the brazen door in the belly of the statue.

Abdashtarth cried: "He lies! This king is no god, but a mortal madman! Slay the blasphemers against the true god of the Pelishtim, the mighty Melek-Qarth, lest the all-wise one turn his back upon his people!"

At this point four Anakim picked up Abdashtarth as if he had been a log of wood and hurled him feet-first through the opening. His shriek was cut off by the clang of the closing door, through which the same soldiers had tossed hundreds of the children of the Pelishtim in times of crisis under his fanatical command. Smoke poured from the vents in the statue's ears, while a look of smug satisfaction spread over the face of Mattenbaal.

A great shudder rippled across the throng. Then a frenzied scream broke the stillness. A wild-haired figure ran forward, a half-naked shepherd. With a shriek of "Blasphemer!" he hurled a stone. The missile struck the new high priest in the mouth, breaking his teeth.

Mattenbaal staggered, blood streaming down his beard. With a roar the mob surged forward. Taxation, starvation, tyranny, rapine, and massacre—all these the Pelishtim had endured from their mad king. But this tampering with their religion was the last straw. Staid merchants became madmen. Cringing beggars turned into hot-eyed fiends.

Stones flew like hail, and louder rose the roar of the mob. Hands were clutching at the garments of the dazed Mattenbaal when the armored Anakim closed in around him, beat the mob back with bow-staves and spear-shafts, and hustled the priest away.

With a clanking of weapons and a jingling of bridle-chains, a troop of Kushite horse, resplendent in headdresses of ostrich-feathers and lions' manes and corselets of silvered scales, galloped out of one of the streets leading into the great Square of Melek-Qarth, their white teeth gleaming in their dark faces.

The stones of the mob bounced off their bucklers of rhinoceros-

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hide, but with unabated fury they urged their horses into the press, slashing with curved blades and thrusting long lances through the bodies of the Asgalunim. Men rolled howling under the stamping hooves—until at last the rioters gave way, fleeing wildly into shops and alleys, and leaving the square littered with writhing bodies.

The black riders leaped from their saddles and began crashing in doors of shops and dwellings, heaping their arms with plunder. Screams of women sounded from within the houses. There was a crash of lattice-work, and a white-clad body struck the street with a bone-crushing impact. Another horseman, laughing, passed his lance through the body as it lay.

The giant Imbalayo, in flaming silk and polished steel, rode roaring among his men, beating them into order with a heavy leaded whip. They mounted and swung into line behind him. In a canter they swept off down the street, a dozen human heads bobbing on their lances as an object-lesson to the maddened Asgalunim who crouched in their coverts, glaring with hate.

The breathless eunuch who brought news of the uprising to King Akhîrom was swiftly followed by another, who prostrated himself and cried: "Divine king, the general Othbaal is dead! His servants found him murdered in his palace, and beside him was the ring of Keluka the Sworder. Now the Anakim cry out that he was murdered by the order of the general Imbalayo. They search for Keluka in the Kushites' quarter and fight with the Kushites!"

Rufia, listening behind a curtain, stifled a cry. Akhîrom's far-away gaze did not alter. Wrapped in aloofness he replied: "Let the Hyrkanians separate them. Shall private quarrels interfere with the destiny of a god? Othbaal is dead, but Akhîrom lives forever. Another man shall lead my Anakim. Let the Kushites handle the mob until they realize the sin of their unbelief. My destiny is to reveal myself to the world in blood and fire, until all the tribes of the earth know me and bow down before me! You may go."

V

NIGHT was falling on a tense city as Conan strode through the streets adjoining the quarter of the Kushites. In that section, occupied mostly by soldiers, lights shone and stalls were open by tacit agreement. All day revolt had rumbled in the quarters, for the mob was like a thousand-headed serpent of fire. Stamp it out in one place and it broke out in another. The hooves of the Kushite mounts had clattered from one end of the city to the other, bringing death.

Only armed men now traversed the streets. The great iron-bound wooden gates of the quarters were locked as in times of civil war. Through the lowering arch of the

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great gate of Simura cantered troops of black horsemen, the torchlight crimsoning their naked scimitars. Their silken cloaks flowed in the wind and their black arms gleamed like polished ebony.

Conan had lurked in his quarters until his head-wound had healed to a degree. Having achieved his revenge, he had not quite decided what to do next. He did not want to return to Akkhariya, which was a small place, even for a Shemitish city-state, with no great wealth. Moreover the fiercely exclusive racial and national pride of the people would prevent an outsider like Conan from rising very high.

The unsettled condition of Asgalun provided troubled waters to fish in, but here his expectations of profitable mercenary service had received another check. Three groups, differing widely in race and culture, contended with venemous jealousy for dominance over the rich city-state.

None would accept the Cimmerian, because each suspected him of being a spy that one of the other bodies of mercenaries was trying to plant in their midst. Perhaps, thought Conan, he would do better under one of the Hyborian rulers to the north, who would pick men solely on a basis of fighting ability. Another day or two and he would see.

He entered a cook-shop where girdled warriors gorged and secretly guzzled wine, and ordered a joint of beef. When the joint arrived he dug his teeth into it with even more than his usual gusto, for the success of his vengeance had made his spirits soar. While devouring a mass of meat that would have satisfied a lion, he listened to the talk around him.

"Where are the Anakim?" demanded a mustached Hyrkanian, cramming his jaws with almond-cakes.

"They sulk in their quarter," answered another. "They swear the Kushites slew Othbaal and show Keluka's ring to prove it. Keluka has disappeared and Imbalayo swears he knows nothing about it. But there's the ring, and a dozen had been slain in brawls when the king ordered us to beat them apart. By Asura, this has been a day of days!"

"Akhîrom's madness brought it out," declared another in a lowered voice. "How soon will it be before this lunatic dooms us all by some crazy antic?"

"Careful," cautioned his mate. "Our swords are his so long as Xayarsha orders. But if revolt breaks out again, the Anakim are more likely to fight against the Kushites than with them. They say Akhîrom has taken Othbaal's concubine Rufia into his harem.

"Naturally that angers the Anakim more, for they suspect that Othbaal was slain by the king's orders, or at least with his consent. But their anger is as nothing beside that of Zeriti, whom the king has put aside! The rage of the

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witch, they say, makes a sandstorm of the desert seem like a spring breeze."

Conan's moody blue eyes blazed as he digested this news. The memory of the red-haired wench had haunted his imagination during the last three days. With such a companion the long road to Koth would be a pleasant one, he told himself, and the thought of stealing her out from under the nose of the mad king added spice to the prospect.

He remembered then that in Asgalun there was one person who could really help him in this enterprise—Zeriti the Stygian. If he was any judge of human motives she would be glad to do so.

He left the shop and headed toward the wall of the inner city. Zeriti's house, he knew, was in an isolated part of Asgalun. To get to it he would have to pass the great wall, and the only way he knew of doing so without discovery was through the tunnel that Farouz had shown him.

Accordingly he crossed the canal and made his way to the grove of palms near the shore. Groping in the darkness among the ruins, he found and lifted the slab. Again he advanced through blackness and dripping water, stumbled on the other stair, and mounted it. He found the catch and emerged into the corridor, which was now dark. The house was silent, but the reflection of lights elsewhere indicated that it was still occupied, doubtless by the slain general's servants and women.

Uncertain as to which passageway led to the outer air, he set off at random, passed through a curtained archway—and confronted six giant slaves who sprang up glaring. Before he could retreat he heard a shout and a rush of feet behind him. Cursing his luck he ran straight at them. A whirl of steel and he was through.

Leaving a writhing form on the floor behind him, he dashed through a doorway on the other side of the room, while curved blades sought his back, and sang through the air behind him. The instant he slammed the door steel clattered on the wood and glittering points showed through the panels. He shot the bolt and whirled, desperately searching for an exit. His gaze encountered a gold-barred window.

With a headlong rush he launched himself full at the aperture. The soft bars tore out with a crash, taking half the casement with them, before the impact of his forward-plunging body. He shot through space as the door crashed inward and a dozen insensately enraged figures crowded into the room.

When Conan plunged through the window, he had no idea of what lay in the darkness ahead of him. Shrubs broke his crashing fall. Springing up, he saw his pursuers crowding through the window he had just shattered. He was

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in a garden—a great shadowy place of trees and ghostly blossoms. His hunters blundered among the trees while unopposed he reached the wall, sprang high, caught the coping with one hand, and heaved himself up and over.

He halted to orient himself. Though he had never been in the inner city, he had heard it described often enough so that he carried a mental map of it. He was in the Quarter of the Officials.

Ahead of him, over the flat roofs, loomed a structure that could only have been the Lesser West Palace, a great pleasure-house adjoining the famous Garden of Abibaal. Sure of his ground, he hurried along the street into which he had dropped and soon emerged on to the broad thoroughfare that traversed the inner city from north to south.

Late as it was, there was much stirring abroad. Armed Hyrkanians rode past. In the great square between the two palaces Conan heard the jingle of reins on restive horses and saw a squadron of Kushite troopers sitting astride their steeds under the torchlight. There was reason for their alertness. Far away he heard tom-toms drumming sullenly among the quarters. The wind brought snatches of wild song and distant terrified shouts.

With his soldier's swagger Conan passed unnoticed among the mailed figures. When he plucked the sleeve of a Hyrkanian to ask the way to Zeriti's house, the man readily gave him the information. Conan, like everyone else in Asgalun, knew that however much the Stygian regarded Akhîrom as her special property, she by no means considered herself his exclusive possession in return. There were mercenary captains as familiar with her chambers as was the king of Pelishtiya.

Zeriti's house adjoined a court of the East Palace, to whose gardens it was connected so that Zeriti, in the days of her favor, could pass from her house to the palace without violating the king's order for the seclusion of women. Zeriti was the daughter of a free chieftain, and had been Akhîrom's mistress but not his slave.

Conan did not expect difficulty in gaining entrance to her house. He knew that when she pulled hidden strings of intrigue, men of all races and conditions were admitted to her audience chamber, where dancing-girls and the fumes of the black lotus offered entertainment. That night there were no dancing-girls or guests.

A villainous-looking Zuagir opened the arched door under a burning cresset and admitted the Cimmerian without question. He showed Conan across a small court, up an outer flight of stairs, down a corridor, and into a broad chamber bordered by fretted arches hung with curtains of crimson velvet.

The large, lamp-studded room was empty, but somewhere sounded the scream of a woman in pain.

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Then came a peal of musical laughter, also feminine and indescribably vindictive and malicious.

Conan jerked his head to catch the direction of the sounds. Then he began examining the drapes behind the arches to see which concealed doors.

VI

IN THE Great East Palace, where slave-girls and eunuchs glided on bare feet, no echo reverberated of the tumult that seethed outside the walls. In a chamber whose dome was of gold-filigreed ivory, King Akhîrom, clad in a white silken robe that made him look even more ghostly, sat cross-legged on a couch of gemmed ivory and stared at Rufia kneeling before him, his eyes fanatically gleaming.

Rufia, kneeling on a cushion of cloth-of-gold, wore a robe of crimson silk and a girdle of satin sewn with pearls. But amidst all this splendor the Ophirean's eyes were shadowed. She had inspired Akhîrom's latest madness, but she had not mastered him. Now he seemed withdrawn, with an expression in his cold eyes that made her shudder.

Suddenly he spoke: "It is not fitting for a god to mate with mortals."

Rufia started. She opened her mouth to speak, then found that fear had bound her tongue.

"Love is a human weakness," he continued. "I will cast it from me. Gods are beyond love. Weakness assails me when I lie in your arms."

"What do you mean, my lord?" she ventured.

"Even the gods must sacrifice, and therefore I must give you up, lest my divinity weaken." He clapped his hands, and a eunuch entered on all fours. "Send in the general Imbalayo," he ordered.

The eunuch banged his head against the floor and crawled out backward in conformity with the most recently instituted customs of the court.

"No!" Rufia sprang up in wild terror. "You cannot give me to that beast!"

She fell to her knees, catching at his robe, which he drew back from her.

"Woman!" he thundered. "Are you mad? Would you assail a god?"

Imbalayo entered uncertainly. A warrior of barbaric Darfar, he had risen to his present high estate by wild fighting and crafty diplomacy. But shrewd, brawny, and fearless though he was, he could not be sure of the mad Akhîrom's intentions from moment to moment.

The king pointed to the woman cowering at his feet. "Take her!"

Imbalayo grinned and caught up Rufia, who writhed and screamed in his grasp. She stretched her arms toward Akhîrom as Imbalayo bore her from the chamber. But Akhîrom said nothing, sitting with hands folded and gaze detached.

There was one other spectator. Crouching in an alcove, a slim

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brown-skinned girl watched the grinning Kushite carry his captive up the hall. Scarcely had he vanished when she fled in another direction.

Imbalayo, the favored of the king, alone of the generals dwelt in the Great Palace, which was really an aggregation of buildings united in one great structure and housing the three thousand servants of Akhîrom.

Following winding corridors, crossing an occasional court paved with mosaics, he came to his own dwelling in the southern wing. But even as he came in sight of the door of teak, banded with arabesques of copper, a supple form barred his way.

"Zeriti!" Imbalayo recoiled in awe. The hands of the handsome, brown-skinned woman clenched and unclenched in controlled passion.

"A servant brought me word that Akhîrom has discarded the red-haired jade," said the Stygian. "Sell her to me! I owe her a debt that I would pay."

"Why should I?" said the Kushite, fidgeting impatiently. "The king has given her to me. Stand aside, lest I hurt you."

"Have you heard what the Anakim shout in the streets?" asked the Stygian.

"What is that to me?" was his scornful reply.

"They howl for the head of Imbalayo, because of the murder of Othbaal. What if I told them their suspicions were true?"

"I had nothing to do with it!" he shouted.

"I can produce men to swear they saw you help Keluka cut him down."

"I'll kill you, witch!"

She laughed. "You dare not! Now will you sell me the red-haired jade, or will you fight the Anakim?"

Imbalayo let Rufia slip to the floor. "Take her and begone!" he snarled.

"Take your pay!" she retorted and hurled a handful of coins in his face.

Imbalayo's eyes burned red and his hands opened and closed with suppressed fury.

Ignoring him, Zeriti bent over Rufia, who crouched dazed with the hopeless realization that against this new conqueror the wiles she had used upon men were useless. Zeriti gathered the Ophirean's red locks in her fingers and forced her head back, to stare fiercely into her eyes. Then she clapped her hands and four eunuchs entered.

"Take her to my house," Zeriti ordered, and they bore the shrinking Rufia away. Zeriti followed, breathing softly between her teeth.

ZERITI straightened up from her task and dropped the heavy whip. The undraped shoulders of the woman bound to the divan were

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crisscrossed with cruel red welts—a prelude to a more ghastly fate.

The witch took from a cabinet a piece of charcoal, with which she drew a complex figure on the floor, adding words in the mysterious glyphs of the serpent-worshippers who had ruled Stygia before the Cataclysm. She set a small golden lamp at each of the five corners of the figure and tossed into the flame of each a pinch of the pollen of the purple lotus which grows in the swamps of southern Stygia.

A strange smell, sickeningly sweet, pervaded the chamber. Then she began to incant in a language that was old before purple-towered Python rose in the lost empire of Acheron, over three thousand years before.

Slowly a dark something took form. To Rufia, half dead with pain and fright, it seemed like a pillar of cloud. High up in the amorphous mass appeared two glowing points that might have been eyes. Rufia felt an all-pervading cold, as if the thing were drawing all the heat out of her body by its mere presence.

The cloud gave the impression of being black without much density, as Rufia could see the wall behind it through the shapeless mass, which slowly thickened.

Zeriti bent and snuffed out the lamps—one, two, three, four. The room, lit by the remaining lamp, was now dim. The pillar of smoke was hardly discernible except for the glowing eyes.

At that instant a sound made Zeriti turn. It was a distant, muffled roar, faint and far-off but of vast volume. It was the bestial howling of many men.

Zeriti resumed her incantation, but there came another interruption—angry words in the voice of the Zuagir, a tormented cry, the crunch of a savage blow, and the thud of a body. Imbalayo burst in, a wild-looking figure with his eyeballs and teeth gleaming in the light of the single lamp.

"Dog!" exclaimed the Stygian, drawing herself up like a python from its coil. "Why did you come here?"

"The woman you took from me!" roared Imbalayo. "The city has risen and there is death everywhere. Give me the woman before I kill you!"

Zeriti glanced at her rival and drew a jeweled dagger, crying: "Gereshef! Khaza! Help me!"

With a roar Imbalayo lunged. The Stygian's supple quickness was futile. Before she could leap aside the broad blade plunged through her body, and emerged between her shoulders, standing out a full ten inches. With a choking cry she stumbled, and the Kushite wrenched his scimitar free. At that instant Conan appeared at the door.

Evidently taking the Cimmerian for one of the witch's servants, the Kushite bounded across the floor, his saber whistling in a fearful

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slash. Conan leaped back. The sword missed his throat by a finger's breadth and nicked the door-frame.

As he leaped, Conan tore out his own sword and struck a fierce back-handed blow in return. It was not within reason that the giant should recover from his missed cut in time to parry, but Imbalayo somehow twisted his body, arm, and blade all at once to catch a blow that would have felled a lesser man by sheer impact.

Back and forth they surged, swords clanging. Then recognition dawned in Imbalayo's features and he fell back with an accusing cry of "Amra!"

Now Conan knew that he must kill this man. Though he did not remember ever seeing him before, the Kushite had recognized him as the leader of a crew of black corsairs who under the name of Amra, the Lion, had plundered the coasts of Kush and Stygia and Shem.

If Imbalayo revealed Conan's identity to the Pelishtim, the vengeful Shemites would tear Conan apart—with their bare hands if need be. Bitterly though the Shemites fought among themselves, they would unite to destroy the red-handed barbarian who had raided their coast.

Conan lunged and drove Imbalayo back a step, feinted, and struck at the Kushite's head. The force of the blow beat down Imbalayo's scimitar and came down stunningly on the bronze helmet—and Conan's sword, weakened by deep notches in the blade, broke off short.

For the space of two heartbeats the two barbarian-warriors confronted each other, Imbalayo's bloodshot eyes seeking a vulnerable spot on Conan's form, his muscles tensing for a final, fatal spring and slash. And then—

A shapeless mass of cloudy something, hitherto unnoticed in the gloom, swept forward and fastened itself on Imbalayo's back. Imbalayo screamed like a man being roasted alive. He kicked and squirmed and tried to reach back with his sword. But the luminous eyes glowed over his shoulder and the smoky substance lapped around him, drawing him slowly backward.

Conan reeled back from the sight, his barbarian's fears of the supernatural rising like a choking lump in his throat.

Imbalayo's shrieks ceased. His body slid to the ground with a soft squashy sound. The cloudy thing was gone.

Conan advanced cautiously. Imbalayo's body had a curiously pallid, collapsed appearance, as if the demon had extracted all the bones and blood, leaving only a man-shaped bag of skin with a few organs inside it. The Cimmerian shuddered.

A sob from the divan called his attention to Rufia. With two strides he reached her and cut her bonds. She sat up, weeping silently.

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Suddenly a voice shouted: "Imbalayo! In the name of all the fiends, where are you? It's time to mount and ride! I saw you come in here!"

A mailed and helmeted figure dashed into the chamber. It was Farouz! He recoiled at the sight of the bodies and cried: "Oh, you cursed savage, why must you slay Imbalayo at this time? The city has risen. The Anaki are fighting the Kushites, who were already engaged in a life-and-death struggle. I ride with my men to aid the Kushites. As for you—I still owe you my life. But there is a limit to all things! Get out of this city and never let me see you again!"

Conan grinned wolfishly. "It wasn't I who killed him, but one of Zeriti's sorcery-summoned demons after he slew the witch. I had never believed in such things—until now. Look at his body if you don't believe me, Xayarsha!"

The Hyrkanian started. "What do you call me?"

"I knew you when we entered the house of Othbaal. No one but the master of the house could be so familiar with its secrets. And that house had once belonged to Xayarsha the Hyrkanian. Well, now, have you no greeting for your old friend Rufia?"

Rufia had been cowering behind Conan. Xayarsha plucked at his mustache. "Good. I'll take her back to my house. We have—"

The distant roaring of the mob became louder.

"No," said Xayarsha distractedly, "I must go to put down the sedition. But how can I leave her to wander the streets half-naked?"

Conan said: "Why not throw in your lot with the Anakim, who will be as glad to get rid of this mad king as are the Asgalunim? With Imbalayo and Othbaal dead you're the only general alive in Asgalun. Become the leader of the revolt, put down the crazy Akhîrom, and set some docile cousin or nephew in his place. Then you'll be the real ruler of Pelishtiya!"

Xayarsha, listening like a man in a dream, gave a sudden shout of laughter. "Done!" he cried. "To horse! Take Rufia to my house, then join the Hyrkanians in battle. Tomorrow I shall rule Pelishtiya, and you may ask of me what you will. Farewell for now!"

VII

IN THE great Square of Melek-Qarth, the tossing torches blazed on a swirl of straining figures, screaming horses, and lashing blades. Men fought hand-to-hand: Kushites and Shemites, gasping, cursing, and dying.

Like madmen the Asgalunim grappled the black warriors, dragging them from their saddles, slashing the girths of the frenzied horses. Rusty pikes clanged against lances. Fire burst out here and there, mounting into the skies until the shepherds on the Libnun Hills gaped in wonder.

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From the suburbs poured a torrent of figures converging on the great square. Hundreds of still shapes, in mail or striped robes, lay corpse-pale under the trampling hooves, and over them the living screamed and hacked.

The square lay in the Kushite quarter, into which the Anakim had come ravening while the bulk of the Kushites had been fighting the mob elsewhere. Now withdrawn in haste to their own quarter, the ebony swordsmen were overwhelming the Anakim by sheer numbers, while the mob threatened to engulf both bodies.

Under their captain, Bombaata, the Kushites retained a semblance of order that gave them an advantage over the unorganized Anakim and the leaderless mob. The maddened Asgalunim were smashing and plundering the houses of the blacks, dragging forth screaming women.

The blaze of burning buildings made the square swim in an ocean of fire, while the shrieks of their women and children as they were torn to pieces by the Shemites made the Kushites fight with more than their usual fury.

Somewhere arose the whir of Hyrkanian kettle-drums above the throb of many hooves.

"The Hyrkanians at last!" panted Bombaata. "They've loitered long enough. And where in Derketo's name is Imbalayo?"

Into the square raced a frantic horse, foam streaming from its bitrings. The rider, reeling in the saddle, screamed: "Bombaata! Bombaata!" as he clung to the mane with bloody hands.

"Here, fool!" roared the Kushite, catching the other's bridle.

"Imbalayo is dead!" shrieked the man above the roar of the flames and the rising thunder of the kettle-drums. "The Hyrkanians have turned against us! They slay our brothers in the palaces! Here they come!"

With a deafening thunder of hooves and drums the squadrons of mailed lancers burst upon the square, riding down friend and foe. Bombaata saw the lean exultant face of Xayarsha beneath the blazing arc of his scimitar, and then a sword fell and the Kushite with it.

On the rocky spurs of Libnun the herdsmen watched and shivered, and the clangor of swords was heard miles up the river, where pallid nobles trembled in their gardens. Hemmed in by mailed Hyrkanians, shrieking Anakim, and frantic Asgalunim, the Kushites died fighting to a man.

It was the mob that first turned its attention to Akhîrom. They rushed through the unguarded gates into the inner city, and through the great bronze doors of the East Palace. Ragged hordes streamed yelling down the corridors through the Golden Gates into the great Golden Hall, tearing aside the curtain of cloth-of-gold to reveal an empty throne.

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Silken tapestries were ripped from the walls by grimed and bloody fingers. Sardonyx tables were overthrown with a clatter of golden vessels. Eunuchs in crimson robes fled squeaking and slave-girls shrieked in the hands of ravishers.

In the Great Emerald Hall, King Akhîrom stood like a statue on a fur-strewn dais, his white hands twitching. At the entrance to the hall clustered a handful of faithful servants, beating back the mob with swords. A band of Anakim plowed through the throng and burst the barrier of black slaves.

As the wedge of swarthy Shemitish soldiers rushed forward, Akhîrom seemed to come to himself. He dashed to an exit in the rear. Anakim and Pelishtim, mingling as they ran, chased the fleeing king. After them came a band of Hyrkanians with Xayarsha at their head.

Akhîrom ran down a corridor, then turned aside to dash up a winding stair. The stair curled up and up until it came out on the roof of the palace. But it did not stop there. It continued on up into the slender spire that rose from the roof, from which Akhîrom's father, King Azumelek, had liked to observe the stars.

Up went Akhîrom, and after him came the pursuers, until the stair became so narrow that only one man could negotiate it, and the pursuit slowed for lack of breath.

King Akhîrom came out on the small circular platform at the top of the tower, surrounded by a low wall. He slammed down the stone trapdoor and bolted it. Then he leaned over the wall. Men swarmed on the roof, and below them others gazed up from the main courtyard.

"Sinful mortals!" screeched Akhîrom. "You do not believe I am a god! I will show you! I am not bound to the surface of the earth as you are, but can soar through the heavens like a bird! You shall see, and then you will bow down and worship me as you ought! Behold!"

Akhîrom climbed to the top of the wall, balanced an instant, and dived off, spreading his arms as if they had been wings. His body described a long, steep parabola downward, missing the edge of the roof and plunging on down, the wind whistling in his garments, until he struck the stones of the courtyard below with the sound of a melon hit by a sledge-hammer . . .

NORTH FROM Asgalun, through the meadowlands of western Shem, ran the long road to Koth. Along this road, as the sun rose, Conan and Rufia rode at a canter. Conan bestrode his own horse and the Ophirean woman rode a riderless horse which Conan had caught on the streets of Asgalun that night. She wore clothes from the chests of Zeriti—tight for her full figure, but adequate.

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Rufia said: "If you had stayed in Asgalun, Conan, you could have risen to high position under Xayarsha."

"And who begged me not to turn her back to him? Suppose you tell me that."

"I know. He was a cold unfeeling master. But—"

"Besides, I rather liked the fellow. If I had stayed there, sooner or later one of us would have had to kill the other over you."

The Cimmerian chuckled and slapped the bag of loot from Zeriti's house, so that the coins and ornaments jingled. "I shall do as well in the North. Come on there, beat some speed out of that nag! Do you want Xayarsha's Hyrkanians to catch us before we've even had breakfast?"

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pink fluff

by . . . Craig Rice

The pink fluff came and went—like the wind-blown spume of a shark-infested sea. But their happiness was a shining shield.

"DARLING," I said, wiping the lather off my face as I came out of the bathroom, "of course I know you dye your hair, but I didn't know you dyed it pink."

My lovely wife Amelia didn't respond with the smile I'd expected. She sat there in front of the dressing table where she'd been combing her naturally blonde hair, and frowned at the comb.

I took it out of her hand and pulled the pink fluff out of it.

"It's funny," Amelia said slowly. "It's been turning up in my comb. And in dust balls on the floor. I can't imagine where it comes from."

I examined the fluff. It felt incredibly soft, and somehow it seemed to be warm. I dropped it in the wastebasket.

"Well," I said, "if you will insist in living in a Victorian museum piece of an old mansion, instead of a neat, new, ranch-type bungalow—"

Amelia was in no mood for jokes or laughter. She turned on me, her eyes blazing. "You listen to me, Dan Anderson. If you think you could get me into one

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of those—chickencoops— you're sadly mistaken. To be brutally frank, you're ticky in the coco!"

Then I got mad. "It's a fine thing for the family of an architect who designs those chickencoops, as you call them, to live in a house that was built in the lavender decade."

And in thirty seconds, we were quarreling bitterly.

Suddenly I noticed some more of the pink fluff. Little balls of it, on the floor.

"If we *must* live here," I snapped, "at least you could keep the place tidy."

There was even more of it on the floor. I went out, slamming the door.

I calmed down a little and tiptoed down the hall to see how the rest of the family were faring. In the room next to ours, Judy, our almost two-year-old daughter, was beginning to wake up with her usual gurgle of joy at being alive. I went on down to the room occupied by Ricky, my ten-year-old orphaned half-brother.

At the moment it was occupied by some tremendous structure he was building with an Erector set which, so far, resembled a working model of the Eiffel Tower. I shook him awake and reminded him he had an hour to get off to school.

By then, I was all over my temper. I felt heartily ashamed of myself. I went back in the bedroom and put my arms around Amelia.

"Darling wife," I said, "forgive me. I love you, and if you love this house, I love it too."

The quarrel was over.

While Amelia put fresh powder on her face, I noticed that the pink fluff had disappeared. I thought for a moment that Amelia had picked it up. But when I glanced in the wastebasket, it wasn't there.

That should have warned us that there was something ominous in the offing. But it didn't.

Walking down the street, I looked at the new little houses that had grown up almost overnight on both sides of the boulevard. Amelia was right. They did look a little like chickencoops. Nice, shiny-new chickencoops that cost eleven thousand and up, and that had the last word in kitchen and plumbing equipment, to be sure. But I had to admit there was a certain alikeness to them. I turned around and looked back at our mansion.

It was big, old, ugly, and the paint on its turreted eaves had turned yellow. The trees in the huge, neglected front yard needed pruning, and the spotty grass and weeds contrasted unhappily with the trim little green squares in front of the chickencoops.

Inside, to be strictly honest, it had a kind of charm that was beginning to work even on me. There was a wide, old-fashioned downstairs hall, with a magnificent-spiral staircase leading up to the second floor. To the right was what used to be called a drawing room with

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an elaborately carved, white marble fireplace. To the left was a "ladies parlor," and here the fireplace was smaller, and of veined black marble.

There was a dining room, a library-den, and an enormous kitchen that had been subjected to a half-hearted attempt at modernization. Next to it were the bedroom and bath that belonged to Gloria, our all-purpose maid. She had been dubious about the house in the first place, and announced that she was glad she was on the first floor. I suspected that she thought the house was haunted.

There was a central heating system that had been put in forty years before and I was waiting apprehensively for winter to see if it would work. There was a gas stove and a Frigidaire that had been put in twenty years before, and one or the other was always giving us trouble, especially when we expected guests for dinner.

Upstairs was our bedroom, a big sunny room with windows overlooking what we hoped would someday be a garden. It too had a little fireplace. There was a bathroom big enough to stable a horse, a tub that was almost a swimming pool, a washstand done in marble. There was a little cozy room Amelia persisted in calling a sewing room, though in the three years of our marriage I'd never seen her sew on a button.

There was Judy's nursery, another bath, and Ricky's always cluttered room. Finally there was an empty room that might someday be a guest room, but that right now was used for stuff we hadn't decided where to put. The furniture had come with the house. We'd added in what we'd brought from a four-room flat, but the two didn't mix on friendly terms.

It was a house that only a maverick like Amelia could love. But she'd fallen in love with it at sight and insisted on renting it on the spot. Well, I loved Amelia, so I could love her house too. I went on to my office feeling good.

I came back late for dinner, and feeling terrible. It had been one of those days when the clients were difficult, the boss was difficult, and the office stenographer was just a plain old-fashioned pain.

Amelia was in a mood to match my own. She'd been fighting with plumbers all day.

I made an unfortunate remark about the plumbing in the chicken-coops, and she slapped me. I went into the "library"—no books were unpacked yet—and sulked there until Gloria stalked in, in a mood worse than Amelia and I put together. She motioned me out to the kitchen, and I followed.

"Mist' Anderson, I can't cook with all this stuff all over the place."

There was pink fluff all over the floor, and on the drainboard, and some of it had even become entangled in the electric mixer. I scowled at it. The damned stuff

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had to come from somewhere. I picked up a handful of it. It felt strange in my hand. It seemed to have no weight at all, and it had that warm, soft feeling I'd noticed the first time I'd touched it. It almost seemed to move in my hand.

Suddenly Amelia burst into the kitchen and flung her arms around me. "Sweetheart," she half-sobbed, "forgive me. I was just cross. If you want to move into one of those —those little houses—I will, I will."

I held her tight and said, "*You* forgive *me.* And if you love this house, we stay here."

Gloria beamed and said, "You two get out of my kitchen so's I can serve dinner."

We walked into the dining room. I intended to talk very seriously to Amelia about the pink fluff I'd picked up. But when I opened my hand, it was gone. Gone as though it had evaporated, like pink cotton candy at the circus.

I paused and looked back toward the kitchen floor. Nothing was there. I wanted to ask Gloria if she'd swept it all out the back door, but somehow I didn't dare to.

That was the night the roof leaked.

We'd played with Judy for a while and tucked her in bed. She was the kind of baby who giggled most of the time and was a pure joy to play with. When she was half-way asleep, we looked in on Ricky to comment favorably on his construction job, and then settled down in our room, Amelia on the chaise lounge, me in the easy chair.

I told her about my troubles with a strong-minded client who had her own disquieting ideas about architecture, and she told me of her troubles with the plumbers, and everything was as serene as could be.

It was a serene-feeling room, anyway. The brocaded wall paper had faded, but to a pleasant shade. At first we'd tried our own furniture in it, but a Hollywood bed and modernistic dressing table had proven so definitely out of place that we had stored them in the unoccupied room across the hall.

Amelia was enchanted with the dressing table that had come with the house, and I had to admit it not only belonged in the room, but had a certain charm.

The only picture was a large oval oil painting over the mantel, of a young woman who was as blonde as Amelia and almost as good to look at, and whose clothes —she had on something slightly revealing, of an odd shade of pink —had been fashionable a good fifty or sixty years ago. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, and altogether, she was pleasant to have around.

The rental agent had told me the house had originally been built for her, but that was all the information he had volunteered.

It was spring, but we had a tiny fire going. The rain was beat-

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ing against the window, making the room seem even more cozy. I padded down to the kitchen for some cold beer, and everything was wonderful. Then water began to drip from the ceiling.

I swore and raced up the attic stairs, while Amelia raced down to the kitchen for pans. I barked my shins trying to find the attic light, which didn't make me feel any better. Water was dripping through the roof and seeping through the floor to our room below. Some of it went down my back, and that made me feel still worse.

There was no way of fixing the roof till morning, so I put the biggest pan on the attic floor and went on downstairs. There I made the mistake of sounding off about the house again. The plumbing was bad, the yard looked like a jungle, the heating system probably didn't work, and now, the roof leaked.

Tears formed in Amelia's eyes, but they were ninety percent tears of rage. She came right back at me with her opinion of houses designed by Anderson and Anderson, and we were off again.

And then the pink fluff on the floor caught my eye. I may have imagined it, but it seemed to be at least an inch deep. For some reason or other, that was the last straw as far as I was concerned.

I can't remember just what I said, but I know it was sharp and bitter. I picked up a blanket from the foot of the bed and stalked indignantly downstairs to sleep on the couch in the living room.

Only I didn't sleep. I turned over half a dozen times, trying to get comfortable and not succeeding. All I could think of was that I'd lost my temper with Amelia again and snapped at her.

I'd just about decided to go back upstairs and make up, when I heard her soft footsteps coming down.

"Dan," she whispered, "Danny darling, I'm sorry. I'm so terribly sorry."

"I'm the one to be sorry," I said, and kissed her.

There was nothing more to be said. I picked up the whole hundred and two pounds of her and carried her up the stairs, kissing her a few more times on the way, and tucked her in the bed.

"I'll call Mr. Miller first thing in the morning about the roof," I promised her. "And I'll stick around in the morning and deal with the plumbers."

I noticed as I reached for the light that she'd swept up the pink fluff from the floor. Or had she? For some reason, I didn't want to ask.

In the morning the sun was bright, the sky was blue, and everything was fine. Judy giggled and gurgled in her high chair all through breakfast, and Gloria had made an omelet. The invasion of pink fluff seemed like a bad dream.

I started calling Mr. Miller right after breakfast and reached him

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about nine o'clock. He sounded as apologetic as though he had bored the hole in the roof himself, and promised to have workmen over within an hour.

We played with Judy until the plumbers came, and then put her in her play pen.

Up to then everything had been perfect, but you know plumbers. The first fifteen minutes I was filled with sympathetic understanding for Amelia and her struggles of yesterday. By the end of the second fifteen minutes a real Donnybrook was going on, a three-way one.

I was arguing with the plumbers, they were arguing with Amelia, and she was arguing with me. The only people who seemed to be getting along were the plumbers. In the middle of it Amelia ran up the stairs and I heard the bedroom door slam. In her play pen, Judy began to bawl.

Gloria came out from the kitchen, gave me a dirty look, picked up Judy and carried her out with her.

"Do the job any way you want to," I told the plumbers. "Hell, this old rattletrap is falling apart at the seams anyway." And I raced upstairs after Amelia.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking as though she was going to cry or throw something at me. Probably the former. And that infernal pink stuff was all over the place. I felt a cold feeling all over.

Amelia wasn't going to cry, she wasn't going to throw anything. She was staring at the pink fluff and her face was pale.

I sat down beside her and put an arm around her.

"Darling," I said, "we can figure out where this comes from. A lot of stuff accumulates in an old house like this—and in new ones, too," I added hastily. "Something pink in the house is getting mixed up with it. The chances are, it's that pink chenille robe of yours. A little lint comes off and mixes with the dust."

It was a good explanation, and I was proud of it. "So," I said, "we'll get that robe out of the house right away."

She gave me a funny look that I didn't quite like.

"That pink chenille robe went to the laundry three days ago," she said quietly. Much too quietly.

An absolutely unreasoning rage shook me. Not at Amelia. But at this infernal dust that seemed determined to drive us either out of our home, or out of our minds.

I kissed Amelia again to make sure she wouldn't think I was angry at her and said again, "Don't worry, darling."

It didn't make me feel any better to look down and see that the floor was spotless again. Maybe the breeze through the open window had blown the fluff away.

But I didn't think so.

"Angel," I said, "I'm going to take everything pink out of this

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house. Everything, understand? I'll begin with this room."

There was a pink blanket folded on the foot of the bed. I grabbed that, and looked at the bedspread. It too had come with the house, and it was a lovely thing. But it was a faded rose-pink. I ripped it off the bed. Fortunately the draperies were blue, or they'd have come down quickly enough.

I went through the closet. On the last hanger there was an ashes-of-roses knitted suit. I pulled it off the hangar and said, "Sweetheart," I'll buy you another one. Two other ones."

She smiled at me. A sweet smile, but a wan one.

I laid the bedspread on the floor and dumped the other stuff on top of it.

"Lingerie?" I asked her. "Slips, nightgowns, anything?" Then I remembered that she always wore white, blue, or Nile green. Luckily for her.

I went into Judy's nursery. Without awakening her I removed a crib blanket, a couple of sweaters, a tiny pair of pajamas, and some socks. Then I stopped in Ricky's room. I hardly expected my lively young half-brother would be hiding anything pink in the way of wearing apparel but I looked around just the same. There was a roll of pinkish crepe paper involved in some project he was making for a school exhibit. I took that along. I wasn't taking any chances now.

There was a pink towel in the bathroom, and it went swiftly into the collection. Downstairs, I went through the rooms as though I were searching for the crown jewels. I found a luncheon set with a pink linen border, and Gloria had a pink flannelette nightgown for which I had to pay her two dollars.

Back in our bedroom, I looked it over. I knew there wasn't another pink item in the house. I started to tie the corners of the bedspread together.

"Danny," Amelia said, "none of those things are the right shade of pink."

I looked at them, and I knew she was right. The pink fluff had been an odd shade of pink, one that I'd never seen before. But I didn't want Amelia to worry.

"Lint mixed with dust could be a different shade," I said in what I hoped was a stern voice. I tied my collection up as neatly as I could. It made a bundle about the size of a basket-shrouded litter of unwanted kittens.

"I'm going to take it down to the office," I told her. "That means I'll have to take the car, but you ought to rest anyway. These last few days have been rough for you. And I'll be back early." I kissed her on the cheek.

She really smiled, not wanly this time. "I can picture papa Anderson when pink fluff begins to turn up all over his office."

I was thinking the same thing, but I wasn't smiling about it.

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On a sudden impulse, I stopped at old man Miller's office. He wasn't in, but his secretary was—a gray-haired woman with a face like a recently sharpened axe. She told me he'd be back late in the afternoon.

"Ask him to call me," I said. "Or better yet, have him come to see me at the house."

She lifted her eyebrows. "I'm sure he arranged for the roofers to be there—"

"They're doing a fine job," I told her. "It's something else." I caught my breath and lit a cigarette. "Miss Pearce, do you know anything about—previous tenants?"

She scowled. "Mr. Miller can tell you more. I've only been here about twenty years, but—" She consulted a card file. "The last tenants were a couple named Braun. They only stayed a few months, though Mr. Braun paid up the rent to the end of the lease."

"Very generous of him," I said, wondering if I could raise enough money to do the same.

"I remember them," she said. "Mrs. Braun was seriously ill, and had to be taken to a quite different climate. That was about ten years ago."

Amelia. Where would I take her?

"The house has been empty since," she told me. She looked at me narrowly as though expecting a complaint. "It's been kept in excellent condition, except for that loose shingle on the roof. I'm sure Mr. Miller must have told you that there was a caretaker went in three times a week to clean and dust and air the house. That was stipulated in the original owner's will."

I nodded. "There was nothing to complain about," I said reassuringly, and somehow managing a smile.

I remembered vaguely what old Mr. Miller had said about the original owner. A widow who'd died, childless, somewhere in her eighties or nineties. Her will had stipulated that the house must be kept up, tenanted or untenanted. Too bad she hadn't included the yard in the stipulation. The bequest went into an estate, the income from which was parceled out to remote relatives somewhere in Oregon.

"Do you have the name of the caretaker?" I said. "I'd like to talk to him—or her." This time I managed the kind of smile I usually reserved for a rich client.

"A Mrs. Daly," she said. "If you'll wait a minute, I'll find her address." She found it, and wrote it down for me. *Mrs. T. Daly, 864 River Street.*

I thanked her and, incredibly, she smiled at me. I bet her cheeks were lame for days.

Mrs. T. Daly was at home. She was a husky, gray-haired, middle-aged woman who mistook me first for an insurance collector, then for a vacuum cleaner salesman, and finally invited me in.

She'd gone to the old house

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every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, to dust, clean the floors, and make sure everything was in order. Once a month she washed the windows.

"And you can't say I didn't keep the place spotless, Mr. Anderson."

"It was spotless when we moved in," I said. Rather, I lied.

No, she could tell me nothing about the house. She didn't even know who had built it, or how many tenants had lived in it since.

"Tell me," I said, choosing my words carefully, "were you ever bothered much by dust?"

That brought a grin to her face. "There's not much dust in a house where there's no living person about to stir it up, and with me cleaning three times a week—oh, a certain amount would come in through the cracks around the windows and under the doors. But I say, there's always a little dust everywhere."

I held my breath for a moment. "Mrs. Daly, what color was the dust?"

She stared at me blankly. I wondered if she was considering calling the men in the white coats.

"Why," she said at last, "dust color, of course."

There was nothing to be learned here. I thanked her and went away.

To say that Dad, to say nothing of the office help, looked with surprised disfavor at my lugging a collection of pink odds and ends into the office was putting it mildly. Very mildly. But I brazened it out through the front lobby, the front office, and finally dumped the bundle on the floor of my sire's inner sanctum.

"Are you planning to do your laundry here in the office from now on?" he asked coldly.

"Dad," I said, trying to catch my breath, "don't ask questions now. Just let me put this in a safe place, and lock it in."

I'll say this for him, and I could have said it when I was nine years old. He doesn't ask unnecessary questions. He indicated the coat closet without a word. I stuffed the bundle in the closet, shut and locked the door, and sank onto a chair.

He looked at me severely. "You should have been here this morning. That Mrs. Dickenson who wants a house under twenty thousand has been reading Hollywood magazines, and she's dead set on a running brook meandering through her living room."

"Tell her to come back next week," I said, "and I'll guarantee her the brook, with speckled trout in it yet. Plus Lake Michigan in the dining room, and Lake Ontario in the bedroom."

"How about the bathroom?" Anderson, Senior, asked.

In spite of myself we grinned at each other. "It'll have to be Lake Superior," I said. Mrs. Dickenson weighed a good hundred and eighty pounds.

After a minute or two, Dad's face sobered. "What's the matter,

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Dan?" he asked. He'd never called me Danny. No one but Amelia had that privilege—and that she abused it goes without saying.

"Something about the house," I said. "Something's getting *into* the house."

"Termites?" he said. "I warned you kids when you rented the place."

"No, not termites." Suddenly I couldn't tell him, much as we understood each other. Hard-headed Dad would probably call a doctor and have me certified. "I'll tell you about it—well, later," I promised.

As I said, he never asked questions.

"But," I said, trying to keep desperation from my voice, "what do you know about the house?"

"Nothing except what we dug up when you decided to rent it. It was built around eighteen-eighty for a Mrs. Avallone, at a cost that was a fortune in those days. It was way out in the country then."

"No chickencoops built around it," I muttered.

"What was that?"

"Never mind," I said. "Go on." I hoped my voice didn't sound as hoarse as it felt.

"She died, a widow, in the early nineteen-twenties, at the age of eighty. She left the house to an estate, and the income to some distant cousins. The place is well built, but the roof and plumbing need repairs. The heating system is in good repair."

"I know all that," I said. He hadn't told me about the heating system, but I was grateful for the information. At least, as grateful as I could be about anything under the circumstances.

"Dan," he asked again, "is anything wrong?"

I stood up. "No, Dad. Everything's fine." I hoped the lie didn't show in my face. I felt a sudden terrible urgency to get back to the house. Amelia was alone there, except for the easily scared Gloria, and the two kids, one of them under two years old. "No," I repeated, "everything's perfect. I'll be in as usual in the morning." *I hope,* I said to myself. "And please keep that door locked," I finished.

If a traffic cop had stopped me on the way home, I'd have been given ninety days for speeding. I didn't know why I had to be there in such a hurry. I just knew that I did.

Amelia met me at the door, and I could see by her face that there was trouble.

"Why didn't you go to the office?" she demanded. "I tried to call you and you hadn't been there."

"I did go to the office," I snapped back. "I had a couple of stops to make first. But I went to the office, and if you don't believe it, call up again. They'll tell you."

For a minute I thought she was going to slap me. Then she turned away and walked slowly into the "ladies parlor." I went up the stairs just as slowly.

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There were wisps of pink fluff all over the place. On the staircase, in the hall, and a good inch of it on the bedroom floor. I had just stepped inside when I heard Ricky call me. I went down to his room.

"Dan," he complained, "how can I ever finish my construction job when this doggone junk keeps blowing in here?"

I looked at his model. Every joint was clogged with pink fluff.

"I'll take care of it," I promised him, and I meant it.

I went on down to Judy's nursery. She was sitting up in her crib, laughing and gurgling, and she was playing with a bit of the infernal stuff with her tiny fingers. I pulled it away from her, picked her up and ran down the stairs to Gloria.

Gloria was dressed, and half-packed.

"I'm not staying here no more, Mist' Anderson," she said. "Not when I could be smothered in my sleep."

"Gloria," I begged. She'd been with us for three years, and she just couldn't do this to us now. "Gloria, please. Only for a few minutes. Then we'll *all* leave."

Judy began to whimper, and that clinched the argument. Gloria took her from my arms into her own ample ones. "Not too long though," she warned me.

She didn't have to warn me. It wasn't going to be too long.

I pulled Amelia out of the "ladies parlor" and half-dragged her up to the bedroom. The pink fluff seemed to be about four inches deep now.

"Start packing," I commanded, "and fast. We're getting out of here, all of us." I shot out the door and down to Ricky's room. "We're moving in half an hour," I told him. "Get all your stuff together."

He stared at me and then at his construction job. "I can't leave this."

"We'll take it with us," I said. "But *hurry!*"

"But Dan," he said. "I like it here. Think how swell the yard will be in the summer when we get it fixed up. We can have a dog, and Judy can have her play pen out there and—"

I almost clipped him one. "You heard what I said," I snapped.

All the way from downstairs I could hear Gloria crooning soothingly to Judy.

When I got back to the bedroom, Amelia was standing right where I'd left her. The pink foam-like stuff was up to our knees. I swore at her for the first time in my life, and started ripping things we'd need out of dresser drawers. I could feel the fluff rising. I knew that it was only a matter of time before it would smother us.

"Stop that," Amelia said sharply. "I'm not going anywhere."

I said, "Do you want to kill us all?" Panic was rising in me like the beginning of a tidal wave.

"I am not going," she said.

I slapped her. Hard.

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I could almost breathe the stuff now.

"How can you want us to leave," she whispered. Tears not from anger, formed in her eyes. "I've been happy here. I've always been *completely* happy here. I love this house, and I love you. We have our ups and downs, our small quarrels that don't mean a thing, but—"

I forgot everything but Amelia. "I'll always be *completely* happy wherever you are," I told her softly.

By the time I got through kissing her, I discovered that the pink fluff was gone. I could hear Ricky whistling cheerfully in his room. Appetizing smells and the faint sound of Judy singing to herself came from the kitchen where Gloria had evidently changed her mind.

We went down the stairs, our arms around each other, and just then the doorbell rang.

It was old Mr. Miller. For the moment I'd forgotten him, and what I'd wanted him for. It was Amelia who did the gracious thing. She invited him in, and ushered him to the most comfortable chair in the cozy little "ladies parlor" that was lighted and warmed now by the late afternoon sunlight, and fetched a tray with sherry and glasses.

Mr. Miller was small, and gentle, and white-haired. I'd guessed his age at somewhere in the seventies.

He sipped his sherry, looked at me anxiously and said, "I do hope there's nothing wrong."

"Not a thing," I said. "Everything's fine." And this time I meant it.

He gave a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear that. Sometimes these old houses—"

"I'm an architect," I reminded him, "and I know these old houses are built to last. A leak in the roof can happen to any house. Why over in the new development—" I stopped myself fast. If I'd finished what I had started to say, Amelia would never have let me hear the last of it.

"If it's ever on the market," I said, "we'll probably buy it."

"We love this house," Amelia said.

"And we'll probably live here a long time," I told him. "That's why I invited you here. When you live in a house, you like to know who built it, who lived in it—all about it, in fact. A house is more than four walls and a roof that looks like a—a chickencoop."

From across the room, Amelia kissed me with her eyes. She rose and refilled Mr. Miller's sherry glass.

"Thank you, my dear." He smiled at her. "This house has a rather curious history. I knew the original owner."

I could have kissed him.

He went on, "Even when I met her, she was a very beautiful woman, though she was in her eighties. I'm sorry to say, she had not been

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a very nice girl, in her youth. She was an actress—no, what you would call in these days, a show girl.

"She was famous—perhaps I mean notorious—because she was so beautiful. She married a rich man, and bore him a son. But life became dull for her and she fell in love with an even richer man." He paused. "I know this from her diary. She showed it to me. It wasn't the money, understand. It was that she loved him."

Amelia came over to me and perched on the arm of my chair. She squeezed my hand.

"She ran away with him," little Mr. Miller said, turning his glass around in his hand, "and took her son with her. Her husband refused a divorce. In those days—" he paused, not having to add anything. "She, her lover and the boy lived in Europe," he went on. "Her husband killed himself. It was a terrible shock to her. She insisted on returning to America. Her lover agreed, but he declined to marry her."

It was strange to hear a story of love and death told in such gentle terms.

"Instead he built this house for her. It cost what was a fortune, in those days. He settled money on her. She had everything she wanted and so did the boy. But ten years later, the boy died of pneumonia, and within the same month, her lover was killed in an accident."

The lovely, smiling lady who looked down from over the fireplace in our bedroom!

"She lived here until she died," little old Mr. Miller said. "I managed her affairs the last years, and she talked to me a great deal. I was —as I told you—given the honor of reading her diary. I drew up her will. Shortly before she died—it was in nineteen twenty-one—I was a young man then. I was only forty."

At the age of twenty-eight, I felt like a mere child.

"She wanted the house to survive. And she told me that she had been completely happy there. Here, I should say. She told me she would never let anyone live in the house who was not completely happy. I remember she laughed, and said that if anyone lived here who was not completely happy, she would come back and drive them out."

He wiped off his eyeglasses. "A remarkable woman."

"She must have been," I said, with all my heart. Amelia leaned over and kissed me on the ear.

Mr. Miller rose and said, "I must go." He chuckled. "I wish I'd been born early enough to see her on the stage. She had an unusual nickname, you know."

I didn't need to ask. My mind's eye had matched up the color in the portrait with another color. But from pure politeness, I asked, "What was it?"

Old Mr. Miller chuckled again and said, "Pink Fluff."

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run around the moon

by . . . Matt Carter

Lars had won undying fame as an historic figure in man's conquest of space. But what price glory —if the children drove him mad?

WHEN HE retired, after half an active lifetime in space, Lars Hendricssen's one overmastering desire was to seek out his birthplace in Minnesota and turn the old Hendricssen farm into a garden. The man who had opened up the Earth-Venus and Ganymede-Neptune runs, and taken the famous *Argonaut III* on the first circumnavigation of Pluto, had had more than his share of adulation. He no longer rejoiced in rewards, and had developed a deep aversion to tensions, and disasters, to feastings and crowds and the company of mixed crews in metal-skinned ships.

All he wanted was a chance to restore the old homestead in strict accordance with his heart's desire—to putter around the grounds, put peonies in the potato patch, azaleas in the alfalfa field and chrysanthemums in the carrot beds. He wanted to eat good Earth food, drink good Earth wines, sleep on a foam mattress and watch lively Earth entertainment in deep focus, full color television.

Above all, he wanted to be left alone.

As might have been expected,

There may be a heartwarming lilt to the time-honored refrain: "Hail, the conquering hero comes!" But if a man is unaware of his own greatness, and seeks only serenity and the quiet sympathy of boyhood friends in the town of his birth such rousing music may grate harshly on his ears. And if the children of an unfamiliar generation add to the cacophony with a defiance all their own—well! You'll chuckle over this amusing and unusual yarn.

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things didn't work out that way. He didn't mind the local-boy-makes-good greeting he received on his arrival, for the people who feted him and made speeches in his honor at the Municipal Building, the Country Club and elsewhere were folks he had known in childhood, and hadn't seen for twenty-five years.

But he hadn't expected it to last. In the course of an incredibly active, dangerous career in deep space and on alien planets, there had come to him no inkling of how his renown had grown. The first indication of the extent of his celebrity came shortly after his return, when Representative Luther O'Brien delivered his welcoming speech from the steps of the town hall.

Lars listened, politely but with only half an ear, from his place beside the Congressman until he heard a phrase so startling that he stiffened to instant attention. "A man's achievements must be memorable indeed when a community such as ours deems it an honor and a privilege to rename an entire township in his honor—"

Turning to Mrs. Leonidas Williams, the one-time Nettie Olssen who had blossomed into a plump, and matronly civic leader, he whispered, "Just what is Mr. O'Brien talking about?"

Nettie stared at him with disbelief for an instant, then pointed toward the big red-white-and-blue banner stretched across the courthouse square. It read:

WELCOME HOME TO
HENDRICSSENVILLE,
LARS HENDRICSSEN

Lars felt as if he had been ploughed through by a high-velocity midget meteor while doing outside skinwork on the Titian run. But he decided, grimly, that there was nothing to do but accept the unavoidable. Events, he thought, were bound to take a more reasonable turn when once the excitement died down.

However, as the days lengthened into weeks and the weeks became months Lars realized sadly that the excitement wasn't going to die down. It merely coalesced into a steady stream of demands on his time— visits from celebrities, television interviews, and requests for lecture appearances before civic and young people's groups.

"Why can't they let me alone?" he asked his old first mate, Harvey Willets, his first welcome guest in a long time. "I've simply done my duty. Now I want a little time to myself."

"I never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd be calling you a modest man," said Willets, deadpan as ever, "but apparently the millennium has arrived. You, skipper, are famous—a celebrity, a great man. And fame exacts a high price."

"For two credits," growled Lars,

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"I'd sign on for the Io colony. At least, out there, I'd have plenty of solitude."

Willets promptly laid two crisp one-credit bills on the table between them. Lars, with an indeterminate low sound of rage, just as promptly knocked them to the floor.

"I won't let them run me out of my own home," he said angrily. Then, seeing the laughter in Willets' eyes, he found himself reluctantly smiling.

Picking up the credits, Willets said, "It's your own fault for being such a top-echelon hero, Lars."

The next morning, while Willets was still there, the *Argonaut III* arrived. The giant triple-traction haulers that brought the gallant old spaceship to the still only half-renovated Hendricssen farm set it down on its empennage smack in the middle of his struggling azalea bed.

Its bright metal skin scarred by meteors and shadowed by the ineradicable burns of subspace travel, the ship which Lars had piloted to distant Pluto eight years earlier, resembled an oversized, old-fashioned pot-bellied stove. In such rural surroundings, it was a monstrosity. Coming up on the run from the distant south pasture, where he had been seeding turf, Lars looked at it in total disbelief.

A sizable crowd was clustered around it, fringed with cameramen and television technicians. Seeing Representative Luther O'Brien and Mrs. Williams in its van, he shouted at them, "What does this mean? Why did you—"

That was as far as he got. Smiling with pride, the former Nettie Olssen stepped forward, bringing both Lars and herself within range of a live television camera.

"In the name of the citizens of Hendricssenville," she announced, "I take great pride in presenting you with a spaceship which has played an historic role in the history of interplanetary exploration. A glorious role, Lars Hendricssen, thanks entirely to you."

Then, turning to Congressman O'Brien, who was anxiously crowding into the picture, she added: "I should also like publicly to thank our able representative, Luther O'Brien, who made very certain that the *Argonaut III* would not be dismantled by a wrecking crew and sold for scrap metal. Here, on the farm where Lars Hendricssen first saw the light of day, it will provide a fitting monument to the unforgettable achievements of Hendricssenville's first citizen."

"I was born on the stroke of midnight," growled Lars to Harvey Willets, who had slipped up sympathetically beside him. "So where do they get that 'light of day' stuff?"

"Watch it, skipper—you're on television," whispered his former aide. "They expect you to make a speech."

When it was over and most of the crowd had left, Lars peered out at the monstrosity from the win-

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dow-wall of his renovated living room. Despairingly, he said, "I thought I'd seen the last of that ugly old flying coffin. Whatever possessed them to set it down right in the middle of my azalea bed?"

"Cheer up," said Willets, as irrepressible as ever. "Back in the early twentieth century, D'Annunzio, the Italian writer-adventurer, had half a battleship mushrooming up from the middle of his lawn. The king gave it to him for taking Fiume."

"Outside of official reports, I never wrote a line in my life," said Lars, aggrievedly. "So why do they have to wish that horror on me? It was the balkiest mule of a ship I ever had to handle."

"You can say that again," Willets agreed. "But I went out on her later, when they fitted power-packs in her stern instead of the old turbo-atomics. She didn't *look* any better. But at least she ran like a milk-horse."

"Humph," said Lars. "If they *had* to put a ship in my garden, why didn't they choose one of the new Star-yacht class? They're a lot trimmer and tidier . . ."

"And a lot more expensive," Willets pointed out. "I got it from one of the television lads that the town picked her up for under a thousand credits, transportation included."

"A half-billion credits worth of junk!" said Lars with bitterness. Then, "Holy Phoebus, look at those kids!"

Like gaudy insects in their bright-colored playclothes, children of all ages and sexes were swarming over the retired spaceship. They were scaling the emergency ladders, climbing in and out of the tailports, and scrambling over the fins. And, as Lars added with a roar, *"Hey!"* the little beasts started trampling his rosebushes.

He made a move to go out and chase them away. But Harvey Willets restrained him. "Watch it, skipper," he warned. "You'll only add to your troubles. You'd better turn it into a project."

"I'll project 'em right out of the universe!" said the irate ex-spaceman. Then, curiously, "What sort of a project?"

Willets shook his head in mock reproach. "The easy life must be softening you up, skipper," he said. "That ship's presence here is a great thing for those kids. It gives them an advantage and an opportunity no other kids have anywhere on Earth. You'll never be able to drive them away. So you'd better use some of your famous executive ability and get them organized. The ship's disarmed, so they can't hurt themselves. Set them up in ground maintenance, space-crew—the whole works. They'll go for it."

"I didn't quit space to wet-nurse a pack of kids," said Lars. But as he watched his rosebushes suffer, he shuddered, quaffed a long drink of Martian lichenwasser, and strode purposefully out of the house.

"First," he told the youngsters,

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after making a survey of the *Argonaut III*, "we've got to put the ship in condition for a trip to Venus. That means . . ." He went on, detailing the special types of equipment needed, amplifying and explaining, assigning various groups of the eager-eyed boys and girls to preliminary tasks, appointing squad leaders and crew-chiefs.

It took quite a while and when he was through, he looked around at the children for approval. And a slouching boy of perhaps thirteen said in an uneven, adolescent voice, "But Captain Lars, we don't want to go to Venus. That's old stuff. We want to go a great deal farther out."

At least, it was a beginning. As a space-skipper, Lars had been the absolute czar of all he surveyed. His word had been final, on every vital matter from diet to life-and-death decisions concerning deep-space repairs. He was used to being obeyed—or else. But these kids, in an enlightened twenty-first century, expected to have their own way, and could be infuriatingly stubborn about it.

After a week of tussling with them, he took his problem to Harvey Willets, who had stayed on as a sympathetic spectator. "It isn't that the little beggars aren't bright enough—or tough enough. It's just that they haven't the slightest idea of discipline."

"Why don't you try a little physical chastisement?" the former first-mate asked. "A single whack often accomplishes miracles."

The next morning, when one of the boys—a plump, over-intelligent specimen with an annoying giggle—laughed at one of Lars' detailed instructions, Lars put him across his knees. The boy let out one yelp of outrage as Lars' large, space-hardened hand smote him with a resounding smack, then took his licking in silence. The others watched in wide-eyed disbelief.

Finished, Lars set the lad on his feet and said, "Now, next time try to remember who's skipper around here."

All of the children walked away and left him standing there alone, by his ruined flower beds. That afternoon, he received a visit from Mrs. Williams, nee Nettie Olssen. She was sweet, reasonable and—visibly outraged. She said, "Lars, do you realize you can be sent to prison for using violence on a child. It took considerable persuasion on my part to talk Binnie Martin's parents out of bringing charges."

Lars scratched his head and said, "But what am I going to do with them? They're making a mess of my flowerbeds. I've done my best to get them organized, but without authority—" He looked at her helplessly.

"Some of the other children's parents and I have talked it over," said Mrs. Williams firmly. "We're aware that you've been away from Earth a long time—and that you've

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been more than generous of your time. We've decided to make a community project out of it. We're going to have the children organize a trip to the Moon."

"The Moon!" Lars exclaimed incredulously. "They aren't interested in anything this side of the asteroids."

"We know." Nettie Williams was as gently composed as only a very determined woman can be. "But we're going to make this seem very real. We're willing to let them stock the ship with supplies, just as they would in a regular journey. Then, when it's finished, they can have a big picnic and pretend it's a real journey."

"Nettie Williams!" said Lars, aghast. "Have you ever tasted space-rations? They're like dehydrated sawdust."

"Never mind," said Nettie Williams, smiling. "The children will love it. It will be great adventure to them, and to children adventure and hardships go together."

"I only hope you're right," said Lars doubtfully. "But at any rate, I'll do what I can to help. I can promise you that."

"Oh, I was sure of you. I told them you'd be cooperative," she exclaimed, rising. She lifted a plump, white-gloved hand and patted his leathery cheek. "You know, Lars, you're really a very sweet man —and a very handsome one."

Lars shuddered and, from the next room, he could hear Harvey repressing sounds of mirth. He flushed crimson and managed to bow the lady out without further entanglement.

When she had gone, he turned to Harvey helplessly and said, "What am I going to do now?"

"I never thought I'd hear that question from you," was his amused reply. "You'd better do exactly as the lady says." Then, more seriously, "Skipper, how about you and me taking a fortnight's trip? I've got a little lodge going begging up by Great Slave Lake in Canada, and it's the height of the trout season."

Lars, who had succeeded in convincing himself that he had aged more rapidly during his retirement than in all the years of his space-travels, sighed heavily, and said, "Thanks, fellow. It sounds wonderful, but"—his expression grew grim —"I'm not going to be driven out of my own home by a pack of moon-struck kids."

"As long as the old *Argonaut* is there, I don't see—" Harvey shook his head and then turned his face away to hide the gleam that came into his pupils. He changed the subject abruptly with, "I wonder if you realize how completely the new power-pack system takes all the guesswork out of space-flight, skipper. If you're determined against your better judgment to go to Pluto nowadays they just put a Pluto-pack in your ship—scientifically powered and geared to get you out there, and back with per-

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fect orbital plotting. It even takes care of the landing problem."

"Robots!" said Lars with a trace of bitterness. "They don't need human crews any more. Let's face it. We're old hat."

"It's simply progress you're railing against," said Harvey. "You can't run away from it. Well, if you won't come north with me, I guess I'll have to stay here and help you over the hurdles with the kids."

"Thanks, friend," said Lars, gratefully.

"Don't mention it," Harvey said.

The project proved to be a frightful headache, but it worked. Somehow, the kids were willing to forego their dry runs to Uranus and Saturn in favor of a "real" picnic trip to the Moon. Under the tutelage of Lars and Harvey, they stocked the *Argonaut III* with enough space-rations to carry it to Proxima Centauri and back—though the very sight of the familiar red-and-blue packets was enough to make Lars physically ill. They packed her with medicines and electronic equipment. They oiled her and painted her and polished her until she looked better than she had on her first trip.

Finally, the great day arrived. It dawned, sunny and warm and free of mosquitoes and Lars went out into the garden for a final inspection. There he found an early-rising Harvey with an eager group of the older boys installing what looked to him like a power-pack in the engine hold a few feet from the ship's tail.

"What's this?" he asked his former aide, in amazement. "It looks real."

Harvey winked at him. "It's a dummy," he said blandly, in a whisper. "But don't tell the kids. They think they're really going to the Moon today."

"Conspiring behind my back," said the harried ex-skipper in mock anger. "A week in the brig for that, Willets."

"Mr. Willets to you, skipper," said Harvey.

Lars grinned faintly, then sighed. He said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if they actually did take off. I almost believe the little rascals could handle it, even without one of the new power-packs."

"Would you really like to see them go?" Harvey asked.

"Yes, I believe I would," said Lars with another sigh. "A real trip would in all likelihood permanently cure them."

"It's a pity," said Harvey. "I agree with you that it would make spacemen out of them—or else. They've got enough provisions inside to stock a whole he-man's flotilla."

He went back to work, superintending the installment of the dummy power-pack.

Not wishing to interfere with his unwelcome charges, Lars remained in the house when the picnic began. He watched the kids, clad in their "official" spacemen's regalia,

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climb into the ugly old ship. He saw them seal her up as if it were for real. And then, unbelieving, he saw flame spurt from her jets and watched in utter consternation as the unwieldly old space-boat rose slowly into the air.

She was a thousand feet above the earth when her power-plant really caught. In a matter of seconds, she was gone, leaving only a faint trail of rapidly dispersing smoke behind her in the atmosphere.

Stunned, and visibly shaken, Lars turned to his former first-mate. He said, his voice low, "*What did you do,* Mr. Willets?"

Harvey looked incredulous. He said, "I told them to send me a dummy. Naturally, to get it, I had to tell them at the depot it was for you."

"For me!" groaned Lars. "Do you realize what this means? I'll never dare to show my face around here again. I—I'm done for."

"Don't worry," soothed Harvey. "It will blow over in good time and you can come back here. After all, it wasn't *your* fault. And the kids will be all right. I saw to that."

"*You* saw to it!" said Lars accusingly, piercing his former mate with an eagle eye before which far tougher spacemen had quailed.

"I had to do something," said Harvey. "Skipper, those kids were killing you."

"A very neat trick," said Lars bitterly. "But what have you accomplished? They'll be back in a matter of hours. It doesn't take long to encircle the Moon nowadays—or hadn't you noticed?"

"That," said Harvey blandly, "depends upon which moon you're talking about."

"Harvey!" said Lars. "Harvey, you didn't . . . ! Where in space *did* you send them?"

"Oh, I put through an order for a power-pack to Triton, out Neptune way. It's going to take them a couple of months. But they'll be back in time for the Fall opening of school."

"But great Jupiter!" cried Lars. "Their parents! And Nettie Williams! They'll have me in jail."

"Not if they can't find you," was Harvey's unabashed reply. "And when the kids get back, you'll be a hero all over again. On my honor, I fixed it so they'll make it."

The communicator began to buzz insistently. Lars started forward to answer it but his friend restrained him. "Better not," he advised. "They'll be furious and unreasonable now. My aircar is waiting outside, primed with fuel. And the lodge isn't deeded in my name. I inherited it from my poor old Uncle Francis. Let's go."

The communicator buzzed again, still more insistently. Lars looked at it, then at the charred patch of garden where the *Argonaut* had rested, minutes before. He said, "What sort of gear do we need to catch those trout?"

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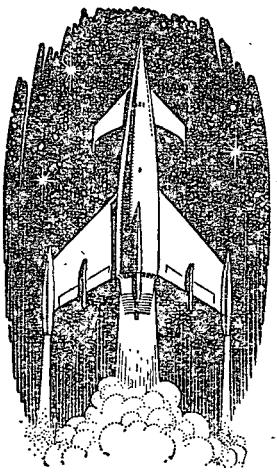

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universe in books

by . . . Hans Stefan Santesson

A sagacious critic conducts a guided tour — new, provocative, and excitingly different — of science fiction in hard covers.

As WILLIAM TENN wrote in the Introduction to his OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS: "If there is one quality common above all others to both science fiction and the historical moment which has produced it, that quality is Change. Change is the recurrent motif of most science fiction: Change in men's societies, men's technologies, men's attitudes. Change even in the very structure of men's bodies and minds."

Is science fiction "a way of life" —as one speaker described it at the New Orleans World Convention?

No—but there is obvious justification for feeling that this "literature produced by our times" has in it the raw material of our Tomorrows! Fabulous things have happened just in the past decade, after all, and are happening right this minute—weird, strange, horrible and still exciting things—happening so quickly, sometimes, that we have a tendency to forget these changes have occurred in our time and in these decades. Novels like George Gordon Hastings' THE FIRST AMERICAN KING (1904, New York) illustrate this.

If you have something more than

Hans Stefan Santesson brings to this column a most unusual background of more than twenty years of both professional and personal interest in Science Fiction and Fantasy. As Editor of the UNICORN MYSTERY BOOK CLUB *he pioneered the reprint use of SF in many editions and has been acclaimed for his critical insight by the foremost writers in the field. Quite as important, he is a man of contagious enthusiasms with a delightfully resilient style.*

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a partisan or regional approach to life, or, for that matter, to the question of our survival as a race, speculation about that future has obvious validity. While we have seen a number of social portraitists of our times (if I may coin a word) attain recognition in the "mystery" field, science fiction has had its small group of thinkers who see or appear to see in SF a possible guide to our Tomorrows. And this, *has,* mind you, been in that same decade that has seen Lait and Mortimer explore Mars and Mickey Spillane take time from more basic interests to discover science fiction!

Don't misunderstand me.

I often like Space Operas, and don't dislike those rewritten Westerns, but—and I say this very, very softly—this often rather tired procession of standard Western and/or cops and robbers situations set against an unconvincing background, a touch of so-called Spillanism added at times, with both writer and publisher sharing an unfortunate contempt for what both dismiss as a transient audience —all this just ain't science fiction! It's a sort of badly brought up cousin. You may call it step-brother if you wish!

Science fiction is Theodore Sturgeon — Isaac Asimov — Ray Bradbury—L. Sprague de Camp in "Rogue Queen"—William Tenn—Robert Heinlein—and still others.

Science fiction is the writers who take pride in their work and in the field, and who realize you readers are not all refugees from the beanie squad! Science fiction survives today as a maturing and distinct literary form because of writers who respect their field in a way the slicksters of the trade have never done!

And while science fiction—in these somewhat uncertain mid-fifties—is admittedly a loose phrase that has come to mean many different things to many different people, writing like William Tenn's, in his OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS (Ballantine) is justification for the survival of the field through and beyond these times. Read his ironic "The Liberation of Earth," the testament of Fiyatil in "The Custodian," and the saga of Irving Bommer "who looked like a man who had gone down into the Valley of the Shadow and had seen much more there to fear than such picayune things as Evil," and put this group of stories by William Tenn down if you can! Recommended!

John Wyndham, as have others, explores in RE-BIRTH (Ballantine) the potentialities of Man in a post-Atomic world. This is a world of blasted, charred and forgotten cities, of the Badlands where nothing grows at all. It is a world of the Fringes country, where nature has run riot and "the Devil struts his wide estates and the laws of God are mocked." Dominating it are the scattered agricultural communities, bound together by this

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grim fear of any departures from the norm, damning the Mutants as "a blasphemy against the true image of God and hateful in the sight of God!"

Telepath David Strorm's father is a man "of local consequence," a stern and godly man. Sometimes in the evenings they would all be called together, "including everyone who worked on the farm. We would all kneel while he proclaimed our repentance and led prayers for forgiveness. The next morning we would all be up before daylight, and gather in the yard. As the sun rose we would sing a hymn while my father ceremonially slaughtered the two-headed calf, four-legged chicken, or whatever other kind of Offense it happened to be." Offenses were not limited to livestock. It might be some stalks of corn, or some vegetables. "If a whole field had gone wrong we would wait for good weather, and then set fire to it, singing hymns while it burnt." David Strorm lives and breathes against this background and in this world that barely remembers that there had been, once, the Old Ones, who must have been an ungodly people . . .

Certainly Wyndham's most mature novel, it is not necessarily "a triumphant assertion of the further potentiality of Man" (to quote the publishers). It grants a possible future—no more. Wyndham, in the struggle for survival of the young telepaths, David, Rosalind and Petra, has drawn a challenging picture of a broken Earth, afraid of the past and as afraid of the future, and still with the seeds of that future within it. RE-BIRTH is important. Read it!

THE MARTIAN WAY (Doubleday) is a group of two novelettes and two shorts by science fiction's own Isaac Asimov. One of the field's most distinguished writers he is this because, in addition to the sound science in his novels, his men and his women move across the stage without that hint at a papier mache effect that unfortunately distinguishes others in the field. Mario Esteban Rioz of the "rangy body, the gaunt, cheek-sunken face that was almost the hallmark of the Martian Scavenger," and bitter Dora Swenson—"Scavenger widow"—are people—not contrived—but simply credible, appealing people. Slim and Red, in "Youth," which some of you must have read some years ago, is likewise characteristic Asimov. And subtly ironic.

Asimov's characters live and breathe and love and hate without the outline peeping out from behind the women's skirts, or the pseudo-human's movements. Asimov, writing of Intelligences, whether human or otherwise, has this sensitivity and this understanding which is the difference, in any field, between writing which will be remembered and writing which will be forgotten! Of course read THE MARTIAN WAY! And

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reread his Foundation series while you're about it!

David Duncan's BEYOND EDEN (Ballantine) is described as a "science fiction novel of Man's ultimate discovery—the source of life itself." Dr. Henry Gallatin is working on a project for purifying and transporting the waters of the Pacific to irrigate the dry western states. "The Living Water," which can "make plants grow with abnormal vigor" and has an even stranger effect on humans, threatens to wreck the Project, already under fire in Congress, with a desperate Senator, who may possibly remind the reader of another desperate gentleman, leading the attack. The crossing of the border into the X-Life that has a growing intelligence of its own, and a memory reaching back to the beginnings of Time, even before the eruption of the Pleiades, is a sensitive and able exploration of an old problem. Recommended.

F. L. Wallace's ADDRESS : CENTAURI (Gnome Press) describes the revolt of a handful of broken humans, isolated on the tiny asteroid near Mars until they take their lives and futures into their own hands. Dochi, spearheading the revolt, had been "an electrochemical engineer with a degree in cold lighting. On his way to a brilliant career, he had been the victim of a particularly messy accident. He'd been badly mangled and tossed into a tank of the basic cold lighting fluid." There *had* been life left in the body when he was finally discovered. "It flickered but never went entirely out." His arms gone, his ribs crushed into his spinal column, regeneration hadn't been easy. The semi-organic cold lighting fluid had both preserved him and, in part, replaced his blood, permeating every tissue. "By the time Dochi had been found his body had adapted to the cold lighting substance. The adaptation couldn't be reversed. It was self-perpetuating." Dochi, his metabolism "akin to that of a firefly"—the strange Nona, and "Anti," the shapeless thing living in the pool of acid that had once been a great dancer, are personalities whose courage you will respect and admire.

In a time when heroism in this field appears to have become the prerogative of the "normals," the galactic version of yesterday's keen-eyed Marshals riding the range, it is refreshing to find this recognition of the possibilities of the "Accidentals"—the men and the women who could not die. Definitely worth reading, unless you prefer formula material.

Lloyd Arthur Eshbach's group of stories, TYRANT OF TIME (Fantasy Press), has been recommended, by another reviewer, "to the young in heart." I can't entirely disagree. The "Tyrant of Time"—the deathless brain that had developed incredible mental powers, is of course the Eshbach's "Time Conqueror," published in 1932.

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The shorter "Dust," "Singing Blades," and "The Meteor Miners," are likewise interesting. While the tempo and the thinking of these days may demand faster-moving material, this does not detract from the importance—to other than superficial aficionados—of these stories by a man who has done much for the field.

Science fiction's social satirists have done it again. Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth, in GLADIATOR-AT-LAW (Ballantine), bring us a day when New York's harbor is deserted, when Corporation Law rules, and roving bands of young gangsters terrorize even the "elect." Fast-moving and interesting. Recommended to all who, like this reviewer, enjoyed the controlled irony of the earlier Pohl-Kornbluth novels.

Jack Williamson and James E. Gunn give us, in STAR BRIDGE (Gnome), a fast-moving, suspense-filled and still subtly disappointing novel of a distant future. Alan Horn, perhaps the last of the soldiers of fortune, fighting the dictatorship of the Golden Folk to a dramatic climax, Peter Sair, one-time President of the Quarnon League, who had been called the Liberator, and the strange little man "who could plan in terms of centuries and cultures and races, and live to see those plans reach fruition"—are personalities in what is definitely a movie possibility. Interesting.

Jack Finney reports in THE BODY SNATCHERS (Dell), also apparently written with one eye on the movies, on the attempt by an alien life-form to take over a small California farm. Who and what were "the great pods" that were taking possession of the minds and bodies of these men and women? What made them abandon the invasion, "leaving a fiercely inhospitable planet behind, to move aimlessly on once again?" THE BODY SNATCHERS is fast-moving and a good suspense story. Relaxing.

Charles Eric Maine explores in TIMELINER (Rinehart) an interesting possibility—the instant transition of the mind (the Egyptians would have called it your *ka*) at the moment of Death into the body and mind of a man a few moments or a few milennia later in time. Recorded instances of when the "devil" took possession of a man's mind will recur to the reader. The laws of affinity which govern this transition, and the search of the lonely Hugh Macklin—through the bodies and minds he temporarily possesses—for a return back to his own time and an explanation of why he had "died," makes interesting reading. Recommended.

J. T. McIntosh's THE FITTEST (Doubleday), on the other hand, is a grim, thoroughly adult and intelligent departure from the formula novels about the possible Tomorrows we may not ourselves experience. It is not recommended reading for the superficial reader of

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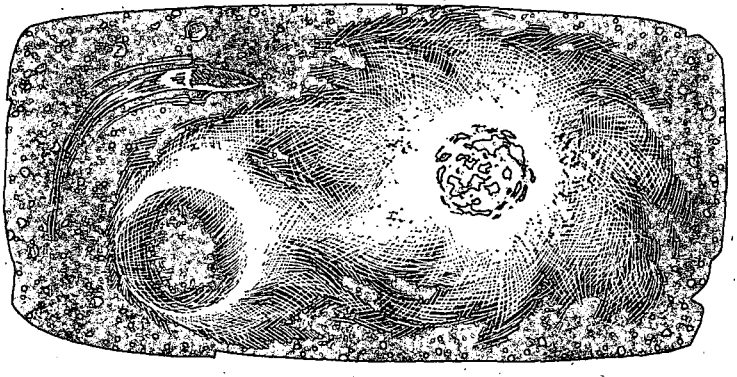
what has come to be loosely lumped together as science fiction. This is not escape reading. This is not "space opera." There is no tense young man about to throw a Galaxy into turmoil, and there is no golden-haired Princess of a latter-day Space Empire ready to surrender her rights to Empire for this young man's love. This is a sober portrait of men and women, stripped of the veneer of the last generations, fighting for their survival as a race. Recommended, for the serious reader.

James Blish's important EARTHMAN, COME HOME (Putnam), describes a time when Earth's nomad cities have become her inheritors. With death yielding to the anti-agathic drugs, and the spindizzy driving the migratory cities at speeds enormously faster than light, the cities, the okies of the future, range the Galaxy in their search for employment and survival. John Amalfi, New York's fighting mayor for the past six hundred years, is an interesting personality whom it's to be hoped we will meet again. The novel is an interesting contribution to the field by one of science fiction's important writers.



If by some unintentional oversight in page-turning you missed our previous happy announcement concerning the 13TH WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION *the tragedy need not be irremediable. For this most exciting of annual events is still very much in the headlines. It will be held as scheduled over the Labor Day weekend in Cleveland, Ohio. The guest of honor will be Isaac Asimov and the program in general promises to be outstanding. For full details write to the chairman, Noreen Kane Falasca, P. O. Box 508, Edgewater Branch, Cleveland.*

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you created us

by . . . Tom Godwin

It was a Pandora's Box of cold, inhuman monsters which man's destructiveness had inflicted on the world. Would they ever die?

HE SAW THE things for the first time in the Spring of 1953. A dust storm was raging across the southern Nevada desert that night, making a roaring, swirling medium through which his headlights penetrated for a limited distance and forcing him to drive slowly despite the importance of his being in San Francisco before noon of the following day. He was a hundred miles north of Las Vegas when he saw them—suddenly caught in the illumination of his headlights as he swung around a curve.

There were two of them, and they were leaping up the embankment onto the highway, less than a hundred feet ahead of him, and in the first instant of seeing them he thought they were huge and grotesquely misshapen men. For an instant the swirling dust partly obscured them. Then they looked toward him as they bounded across the highway, and he knew they were not men. Their eyes blazed green as no human eyes ever could.

He was almost abreast of them as they leaped down the opposite embankment and he saw them

You've seen them in the documentary film triumphs of science fiction's coming of age—the dreadful puffball shapes flitting in reddening sunlight before the shattered windshield of a careening car, the ghostly terrors which a child stricken mute desperately tries to recall, the meteorlike pits full of Medusalike stirrings without intelligible form and substance. Yes, you've seen their like before. But never quite such horrors as these, by a brilliant newcomer to the science fiction fold, in a setting as chill as hoar frost in December.

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quite clearly for a moment. They ran on two legs, as men normally would run, but they were gray and scaly things eight feet tall. They had reptilian, lizard-like faces and they ran stooped forward a little as if to balance their heavy tails.

His tires screamed above the roar of the wind as he jammed on the brakes and reached for the spotlight control. He was beyond them when his car slowed to a stop and the beam of the spotlight finally picked them out. It was a disappointing glimpse, for it revealed only their gray backs disappearing into the windswept darkness to the west.

He backed down the highway to the place where they had crossed, and got out with a flashlight to look at the tracks. They were still visible in the soft silt beyond the highway. Great three-toed imprints they were, clawed, with the first and fifth toes set far back, as the digits are set on the foot of a lizard.

He absently rubbed the back of his head, which felt oddly numb, and followed the tracks for some distance out across the desert. The wind had erased them by the time he had followed them for six hundred feet and when he returned to the car, frowning uneasily, the tracks by the highway had also disappeared.

Back in his car, he checked the mileage from Las Vegas with his map and compass. He found the lizard-things had come from the direction of the atomic bomb test site and that they had been going toward the Funeral Range, which bounded Death Valley along its eastern side in that area.

There was a village fifteen miles from where he had halted and he stopped there for a sandwich. Two hours later, and a hundred miles farther on, the numbness which he had noticed only subconsciously, suddenly left the back of his head. With its going, the realization and fear came to him.

He had seen things that had not existed upon earth for a hundred million years, if ever—and he had been no more than mildly interested. He had seen them at close range as his car swerved past them. He had seen the powerful bulk of them, had seen the way their jaws were lined with knife-like serrations. Either of them could have torn him into ribbons in a matter of seconds.

Yet, knowing that, he had followed their tracks out into the darkness armed only with a flashlight. He had not been afraid and only a mindless fool would have been unafraid under such unusual circumstances.

He had told no one in the village of what he had seen as he ate his sandwich. At the time it had seemed of little importance to him. Now, it was too late to tell them. He could not go back and say: "By the way, I forgot to mention it when I was here before. I saw a couple of creatures as large as young

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dinosaurs cross the highway fifteen miles south of here."

It was not too late to inform the Army authorities, of course. But what would they think of a phone call in the middle of the night from a madman or a drunk with a wild story of lizard-monsters coming from the atomic bomb test site?

And what if he should risk losing the promotion to superintendent of his company's San Francisco plant by driving back to the army base and telling the authorities in person what he had seen? Would they believe an incredible story which he could not prove and which would indicate that he was not sane.

And in addition he wore a silver plate on his skull where a piece of Chinese shrapnel in Korea had almost taken his life. Would not that be enough in itself to insure that all concerned would dismiss what he had seen as a hallucination caused by the old brain injury?

He knew it had been no hallucination. Yet he had reacted in a manner not at all normal. Why? What had dulled his mind and caused him to accept it all with merely casual interest? Had the lizards done something to him, exerted some kind of hypnotic influence over him, as snakes were said to be able to do when they preyed on small birds? Or was it that the old injury under the silver plate on his skull had manifested itself at last, and he had made the first terrifying step into insanity that night?

Which was it?

He had no way of knowing for sure and fear and uncertainty rode with him for the rest of the night . . .

The demands of his job kept him in San Francisco for two years. During the first year he watched the papers carefully for any scoffingly skeptical reports of lizard-monsters in southern Nevada. There were none and even before the year was out he almost succeeded in forgetting what he had seen. He almost succeeded in making himself believe he had been tired and drowsy from the night driving and had been deceived by no more than two clouds of dust whipping across the highway.

Yet—there had been the green glow of their eyes in his headlights and there had been their tracks. Surely he could not have imagined the tracks! And if he had not imagined them, then the lizard-things might still be in the Funeral Range along the east side of Death Valley.

The creatures had been going toward a particular section of the Funerals—a place on their summit called Chloride Cliff. He had once visited Chloride Cliff and he knew that a trail led down from it into Death Valley, proceeding past an old mine that had known no activity for many years.

It occurred to him that the mine's many tunnels would be a perfect

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hiding place for the lizard-things—until he remembered that Chloride Cliff was a point of interest to the Death Valley winter tourist traffic. It was only a three-mile hike from the end of the dirt side-road up to the abandoned diggings and even though only a minor number of tourists would care to make the hike, it could be safely presumed that at least two or three a week would climb all the way up to the mine. Which meant that at least fifty people must have been to the mine since the night he had seen the lizards.

He met many different people in his work and he acquired the habit of bringing Death Valley into the conversation whenever he could do so in a casual manner. A man from Los Angeles supplied the first clue unimportant though it was in itself. His informant described the various points of interest in Death Valley with a detailed and painstaking clarity: Dante's View, Scotty's Castle, Ubehebe Crater and all the other places. But of the old mine he could only say vaguely:

"There were some tunnels there on a steep mountainside. I don't remember now what they looked like nor how many there were . . ."

Later, he met a man from Oregon who told him, when he inquired about the mine: "I remember climbing up to it, but I've forgotten now just what the tunnels were like."

A client of his firm from Ohio mentioned the mine in the same vague way, as did three young mining engineers from Colorado. The young mining engineers, even though green and inexperienced, should in obligation to their profession have observed the old workings with more than casual interest.

Instead, they couldn't even recall the formation of the rock, although they remembered well the mines at Skidoo, Bullfrog, Rhyolite and the other old camps in that area.

A question arose, and became an obsession with him: *Were the lizards living in the tunnels and using their hypnotic powers to make people forget what they had seen?*

Then the tormenting problem of the lizards lost some of its importance as the shadow of war grew increasingly darker throughout 1955. On May 10, 1956 he received a letter from his superiors, ordering him to the east coast and saying in part:

"With war almost certain to come within the next few months, San Francisco's vulnerability as a target area for enemy bombs makes further expansion of the San Francisco plant extremely unwise . . ."

He debated only briefly about what he would do. He would go to the east coast, of course, but not before he had gone to Death Valley. He could drive his own car east, with the side trip to Death Valley taking no more than an extra day at the most. And it would be

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his last and only chance to learn the truth about the lizard-things . . .

Death Valley was blue with haze under the warm spring sun as he rolled down the long grade from Daylight Pass, between mountains decked in the brightest of Maytime finery. To his left was the harsh, canyon-riven Funeral Range and he drove slowly after he passed the Stovepipe Wells junction so that he would not miss the dirt road he was seeking. He came to it and followed it down into the broad wash and up the long slope to the foot of the mountain.

He parked his car near the beginning of the trail, and slipped on a light jacket—and dropped an automatic pistol in the right pocket and a small camera in the left. He hesitated a moment, and then decided that a notebook and pencil might also prove of value.

He started up the trail then, in his growing excitement forgetting to take the key out of the car. He remembered the oversight when he was a hundred feet up, but he did not turn back. The important thing was to reach the old tunnels, and to take pictures of them, even if he saw nothing. Light-and-shadow impressions on camera film would be incapable of a memory lapse and could not fade away.

He was sweating when he reached the end of the first and steepest half of the climb. His breath came hard and panting, but he refused to stop to rest. He followed the trail in a fast walk, the mountain rearing steeply above him and the canyon wall dropping swiftly away below.

He came first upon the old camp, where the few remaining buildings were warped with age, and the empty, crooked windows gaped vacantly. He passed the abandoned structures with hardly a glance, his attention on the steep mountainside above him where he could already see waste dumps that marked the location of the mine tunnels.

It was impossible to fully control his impatience and he was breathing hard again when the steep trail encircled one of the dumps and the first tunnel appeared suddenly before him. He stopped in his tracks, his hand on the pistol, and studied the deserted excavation while his breathing slowed toward normal.

There was nothing to see—only the empty, yawning, portal of the tunnel and the small, flat area of the waste dump before it. Then, as he stood there, a wisp of a breeze stirred and brought an odor to him from the tunnel. It was, unmistakably, the odor of decaying flesh. *And with it came the sensation of being watched.*

He took the camera from his pocket—the camera that would view the portal with its cold mechanical eye and record exactly what it saw. He found his hands were trembling unaccountably and his fingers had become awkward and wooden. He tried to control the trembling, fearful he would drop the camera before he could

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use it, and he tried at the same time to set it for the proper range.

Suddenly the camera dropped out of his hands. He grabbed at it frantically, striking it with the side of his hand instead of catching it. It was knocked to one side by the blow, and out over the edge of the dump. It bounced once, spun outward in a wide arc and struck the rocks far below with a shattering sound.

When he turned back toward the tunnel the lizard-thing had emerged from the shadows and was standing nine feet in front of him, watching him.

His right hand stabbed for the pistol in his pocket while he made a split-second appraisal of the creature. It stood upright on its big, long-toed feet, towering a full two feet higher than the tunnel opening at its back. Its arms and hands were almost human in shape, though huge and scaled, and the eyes in its massive, reptilian face were regarding him with a degree of intelligence that chilled him to the core of his being.

His fingers touched the butt of the pistol in his pocket, reached around it, and went numb and lifeless.

He knew, then, why his hands had trembled and caused him to drop the camera and he noticed, without surprise, that the lizard had permitted his left hand to return to normal. But the right hand that gripped the pistol still remained limp and numb.

The lizard spoke to him then, soundlessly, in his mind:

Go to the tunnels above.

A strange coldness seemed to be touching his brain, and he obeyed without attempting to resist. But his mind was clear and he saw something he had not noticed before—the tracks of wild burros and mountain sheep in the trail ahead of him. The tracks led only one way, toward the upper tunnels.

He recalled with a shudder the odor of decaying flesh, and wondered if the lizards let some of the meat age, as a man might let cheese age to improve its flavor.

THERE WERE three of them standing before the portal of one of the upper tunnels. A thought came to him from the center one as he stopped before it:

We have been expecting you.

He asked the question that he was sure could have but one answer:

"Are you mutants from the atomic bomb test site?"

Yes.

The coldness still hovered around his mind, but he was no longer afraid, nor even nervous. For some reason they wanted him to be calm and at ease. But the coldness impinging on his brain was not enough to make him forget the importance of learning all he could about them.

"When did it start?" he asked. "And what were you, before?"

It began in the Spring of Nine-

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teen fifty-two. The radiations from the bomb blast affected the eggs of an ordinary desert lizard. I and four others were the result.

"But the two I saw crossing the highway were already grown."

We reach the adult stage in one year.

He wondered how they had provided themselves with food, to grow to such a size in so short a time.

The lizard answered his unspoken question:

The mutation created by your bomb represents evolution to the near-perfect level. We can subsist on anything organic, including all kinds of desert vegetation, even though we prefer meat.

He wondered if there were only five of them, if they were incapable of reproduction.

The lizard's thought came:

We can reproduce. There are many of us in these tunnels and there will be many more when this year's eggs hatch.

So the lizards were mutations as he had suspected from the night of his first encounter with them. The hard radiations from the bomb had altered a desert lizard's eggs, and had done something to the developing embryo that was the equivalent of a hundred million years of evolution—or perhaps a thousand million.

True evolution was slow—a selective process of trial and error over millions of years. What had been the hit-or-miss likelihood that the lizard's eggs would be profoundly affected by the radiations? One chance occurrence out of a hundred million?

It did not matter, because the laws of chance were blind and without memory. A tossed coin would, in the long run, come up exactly fifty percent heads and fifty percent tails. But a coin had no memory and it could come up heads for a hundred times in succession. And the laws of chance evolution, produced by the hard radiations, had no memory either. They would as calmly produce one successful mutation out of a hundred million failures in one year as in a hundred million years.

They would—and they had.

He asked the lizard another question: "Why is it that I saw you that night on the highway and remembered when the others—the ones who have seen you up here—can't remember?"

That was partly due to the brain injury you once had, and partly to the fact we were only one year old and had not fully learned how to use our hypnotic powers.

"Why do you hide?" he asked. "Why are you so afraid that humans will know of your existence?"

The lizard's face remained expressionless but he sensed amusement in the way it regarded him.

What would be their reaction if they knew of us? They would want to see us caged, placed on exhibit. They would want their scientists to

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examine us. And when they found their minds were helpless before ours, they would want to destroy us. Your species and mine are too different for them to ever exist side by side.

"What are you going to do?" he asked. "You can't stay here always. There will be too many of you. Someday you will have to let humans know of your existence."

That is being arranged.

"How do you mean?"

We are letting you humans prepare the way for us.

For a moment he was puzzled. Then, suddenly, he knew what the lizard meant. The insanity of hate and fear and suspicion that filled the world—the insanity that was growing each day and could result only in war.

There is no distance limit to our telepathic influence, the lizard said. *We can concentrate upon influencing the important few among your enemies—the policy makers, the agitators, the ones in position to make war. This we are doing. With your own government, we have only to make certain that an enemy attack will find you unprepared. This, too, is being done.*

He thought of the exaggerated claims so often made of American military power and of the seldom-published truth: that the United States was vulnerable to any surprise attack, and lacked even a practical warning system.

How much of that ignorance was due to the mumbo-jumbo of Security? Surely people would demand an adequate warning and defense system if they knew the true peril of their circumstances. But Security did not dare tell them, for in theory such a disclosure would give information to the enemy! It was better to pretend that an adequate defense system already existed, better to label such difficult problems "Top Secret" and file them away and forget them.

The amusement was stronger in the lizard's thought:

This mania for secrecy has been very useful to us and we have encouraged its growth.

"So you would have Asia destroy the United States?"

Let us say the western hemisphere.

"And then what? What would you do with a country made unlivable by radiation from the atomic and hydrogen bombs?"

We are immune to hard radiations.

The coldness and numbness around his brain seemed to be increasing and the scene was beginning to take on a quality of nightmare unreality to him. He knew they were doing something to his brain, to make him forget as they had made all the others forget.

He did the only thing he knew to do. He wrote a short sentence on the notebook in his pocket, quickly, before the lizard could realize what his intentions were, and awkwardly because he had to use his left hand.

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He half expected the lizard to halt the writing before it was completed. But the lizard did no more than stare at him with its scaly face expressionless. He wrote only one sentence—afraid to risk discovery by writing more. He was convinced that the one sentence would be enough. It would convey the needed warning, even if the lizards did make him forget that he had ever seen them.

"So you'll have the western hemisphere attacked?" he asked. "You'll have us killed with bombs and bacteria until there are none of us left to oppose you. What about Europe and Asia? What will you do with them?"

Destruction of human life on the western hemisphere will give us time and room to expand. While doing so we will continue to excite the various nations of Europe and Asia into war and mutual destruction.

"You have it all thought out, then?"

We have. It is very simple. We have only to encourage the human race's own tendencies and capacities for self-destruction.

"There are other tendencies, too."

Yes—the ones you would term noble or humanitarian. It is necessary for our survival that we suppress the humanitarian instincts among you. And none of you will ever know what is being done to you.

There was a moment of silence, and then the lizard's thought came swiftly again:

Do you remember tyrannosaurus rex?

Tyrannosaurus rex—the most formidable of all the reptiles, the mightiest engine of destruction to ever walk the face of the earth. He had been a biped, with claws capable of handling objects, and he had possessed teeth—rimmed jaws so massive that no other creature had dared oppose him. He had been the supreme species and should have survived.

But there had been little rodent-like animals, the remote ancestors of horses and elephants, tigers and men, and they had eaten the eggs of *tyrannosaurus rex. Tyrannosaurus rex* had not even noticed the little animals, and had become extinct without ever knowing the reason why.

Survival of the fittest—and how do you fight something you cannot see? How do men fight something which can control their minds and keep them ignorant of its existence?

He had partially resisted their power before. What if he could retain his resistance and remember what he had seen, and lead other men to the tunnels and show them the lizards?

The thought of the lizard came:

They would see nothing and would have you confined as an insane person.

Did the statement imply that the lizards could not completely de-

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stroy his resistance to their hypnotic powers?

You will forget. It was necessary to engage you in conversation for a while, to distract your attention while we broke down the resistance the brain injury had given you. And it has entertained us to some extent to observe your reactions.

"You can't hope to have all of us killed," he said. "There will be some of us who will live through the germ warfare, some of us who won't get enough of the radioactive dust to die. Those who survive may someday learn what you did to them."

Our plans include making use of the survivors. They will be a useful source of labor and food.

He was sharply aware again of the carrion odor that emanated from the lizards and of the burro and sheep tracks he had seen.

"You will—eat us?"

Of course. Now, you will go.

The muscles of his legs obeyed the command, without volition on his part. He did not even try to resist. His right hand still remained limp and helpless on the pistol and there was only the one hope left—to reach his car and the safety of a greater distance before they learned what he had written in the notebook. If he could only retain just a little of his memory, together with the warning he had written to himself, he would find a way to destroy the lizard nest.

He began the steep descent, not looking back. He passed the first lizard he had seen. It was standing in the same place, watching him with the same cold intelligence in its eyes and the same carrion odor emanating from it.

He hurried on, down to the warped and empty shells that had been houses and past them. Life suddenly returned to his right hand and he stopped a moment to look back the way he had come. But the tunnel portals were not visible from where he stood—only the lower sides of the high waste dumps.

He went on in a fast walk, gripping the notebook in his pocket as though the feel of it might help him remember and help him hold off the encroachment of the cold numbness around his mind.

But the numbness increased as he walked and he broke into a run as the fear of forgetting what he had seen intensified. It became greater, an apprehension that was close to terror. He was still running when he reached the final and steepest half of the trail.

He did not pause for breath, not even when he fell once and almost slid over the edge of the trail and down into the rocky bottom of the canyon far below. There was something far more important than his individual survival involved and if only he could reach his car with the warning he had written to himself . . .

He was bruised and staggering with exhaustion when he came at last to his car. But he could still

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remember and he still held the notebook firmly clasped in his hand. He started the engine the moment he was behind the wheel and tore the top sheet from the notebook, to put it in his billfold where he would be certain to see it again, no matter what happened to him. The writing on it was clumsy and scrawling but it was legible:

Mutants — tunnels — hypnotic powers — invisible — DANGER.

He folded the note carefully, thinking of the world as it would be when the bombs and bacteria had played their roles—thinking of the dead, shattered cities and the lifeless fields, and the long, slow process of evolution that had begun as a speck of protoplasm in an Archeozoic sea two billion years before.

It had been a long way up from that mindless speck of protoplasm, up and up through the fishes and the lung-fishes, and the amphibians, and then higher still through the Age of Reptiles and the Age of Mammals, to Man. Man, naked and defenseless, with neither fangs nor claws, who had arisen to dominate the world.

And now a new species had appeared, created by chance, to destroy Man as thoroughly as Man's remote mammalian ancestors had destroyed *tyrannosaurus rex*. If he ever forgot what he had seen, if the lizards were not checked, there would be a quick end to the long, long climb toward the stars. It would be violence and death and radioactive dust swirling across a lifeless land . . .

From high on the mountain behind him came a thought, cold and taunting with amusement:

Remember! You, yourselves, created us.

Then the full force of the numbness swept through his mind, and memory and consciousness fled.

He shook his head, wondering what had caused the fleeting vertigo, and unfolded the paper in his hand curiously. He read: *Mutants — tunnels — hypnotic powers — invisible — DANGER.*

It seemed to him he could remember it as a memorandum he had written before leaving San Francisco, something to remind him to look at the tunnels. He tore the paper into bits and threw them out the window of the car, where the Death Valley wind set them to spinning and dancing.

Death Valley . . . For a moment, as he drove through the swirling scraps of paper, it seemed to him the name should have some grim significance. And, for a moment, it seemed to him he could sense something far behind him on the mountain regarding him with sardonic amusement.

Then the feeling passed as he remembered he had found nothing but empty tunnels there and he drove on, thinking, for some strange reason, of the mighty *tyrannosaurus rex* dying out because some little animals he did not notice were eating his eggs.

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weather prediction

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

Passman couldn't remember phone numbers. But his faulty dialing gave him a tip on the weather that came from pretty high up!

GEORGE PASSMAN'S wife had often told him he ought to have his memory trained because he was so bad about telephone numbers. Even after someone would carefully write a number down for him, he was apt to mix up the figures in dialing, so that he seldom got the person he wanted.

More often he got a harsh noise indicating that the telephone company disapproved of the combination of letters and figures he had just evolved. This trouble with the telephone had been a constant source of friction between him and his wife during the twelve uneventful years of their marriage.

"Please, George," Elinor begged, as she sat before the dressing table dragging her dull blonde hair into a Psyche knot at the nape of her neck, "see if you can't get it right just this once. WEather 6-1212; that's W-E-"

"I know, I know," George said irritably.

And he *did* know, he *did* understand—up to the moment he got his hands on the telephone. Then something went wrong. Friends had often suggested that he try psychoanalysis, but Elinor had re-

Few writers excel Evelyn E. Smith in the difficult art of instilling a witty and rapier-like irony into stories as innocent of guile as a rosy cherub at a flower show. How, for instance, could the innocence of Mr. Passman have been surpassed, until he latched on to something as big as the universe of stars?

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pudiated the suggestion indignantly, knowing that analysts tended to blame the wife for whatever was wrong with the husband, and not wanting George to get any ideas.

Although there was an extension on the table between the beds, George went to the phone in the living room, carefully shutting the door between. Elinor knew that it made him nervous to have anyone watch him in the act, and wondered what he did in the office. Was he able to conquer his phobia—or whatever it was—there, or did he delegate all telephoning to his secretary.

She had finished dressing when he came back ten minutes later. "You might have given me the weather report first," she observed, looking pointedly at the shaker and glasses he carried on a small tole tray.

He poured two drinks. "Going to be a storm tonight," he announced.

"But, George, that's impossible! There isn't a cloud in sight. And the sun's been just—pouring all day."

"Look, I didn't make up the weather report. All I did was call the telephone company and that's what I was told."

"There must be some mistake." Elinor reached for the extension and dialed while he poured himself a second drink.

She hung up and looked at him. "'Tonight fair and slightly cooler,'" she quoted, "'with a low of fifty-eight degrees. Barometer rising . . .' George, if you got the wrong number, why didn't you say so? Why did you have to make something up?"

"Didn't make anything up," George mumbled. "That's what he told me."

She put on her sheared beaver, which doubled as evening wrap, without waiting for him to help her. They rode down in the elevator without speaking. In front of the apartment house she waited for George to bring the car from the garage in the basement. That was one nice thing about living in Forest Hills; there was place to keep a car.

They drove off toward the bridge, resentment in the set of George's shoulders. Exactly like a child, she thought without tenderness. After a few minutes, she reached forward and turned on the radio. Dance music terminated in an announcer's mention of the fact that the barometer was rising and it would be fair and slightly cooler that night but warm and sunny the next day.

"Going to rain tomorrow," George muttered.

"Nonsense," she said.

It was not quite eight when they got to West Forty-fifth Street. She waited outside a little bar they liked while George took the car to a parking lot; she didn't like to sit in a bar alone. When he came back they each had a couple of Martinis and by then it was eight-twenty and

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time to go to the theater. The Cottons were already waiting for them in the lobby, and all four went on in together.

"Don't mind George," Elinor said in a loud whisper to Mrs. Cotton, as the men checked their coats, "he's sulking again. He got the wrong number when he was trying to find out the weather from the telephone company and, rather than admit it, he made up a weather report."

Both ladies tittered and Mr. Cotton chuckled, "Technological age still got you, eh, George?"

"It's going to storm," George said stubbornly. The other three laughed.

During the last act of the play they heard the unmistakable sound of thunder outside. When they got out of the theater rain was pouring in torrents. Elinor looked at her husband, compressed her lips tightly, and said nothing. After all, he couldn't have produced the storm himself, no matter how much she'd have liked to blame him for it.

"We might stay under the marquee until the rain stops," Mrs. Cotton suggested, "because we won't possibly be able to get a cab in this weather."

"The rain won't stop," George said.

"Go get the car, George," Elinor told him. "We'll drop Herb and Lou off first."

The Cottons chorused grateful acknowledgment. "But George'll get wet," Mrs. Cotton murmured perfunctorily.

"He doesn't mind. Do you, dear?"

George made a growling sound and plunged out into the storm.

As soon as he had gone, Mrs. Cotton asked, "But how did he know it was going to rain?"

"It was a lucky guess," Elinor said. "Don't encourage him."

But when George had returned with the car, and the Cottons had been packed into the back seat, Mrs. Cotton repeated her question. "How did you know, George?"

"I keep telling you. I called the telephone company and that's what the guy told me."

"They don't have men answering the phone," his wife said, moving away from him so that the wet wool of his coat wouldn't mat her fur. "Only girls."

"I don't care," George replied. "A man answered the phone. I asked him what the weather was going to be—"

"But you don't ask," both ladies said in unison. "They just play a record when you dial that number," Mrs. Cotton explained. "Nobody can hear you . . ."

"This guy did. He said it was very kind of me to ask and he had scheduled a storm—a rainstorm."

The other three shifted in their seats. Mrs. Cotton leaned over toward George so that the odor of *Arpege* filled the front seat. "There's liquor on my breath," he said, "but I'm not drunk. Elinor

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had just as much as I, and she's sober as a—a judge." He laughed as if he had said something funny.

"Well, I don't know," Mr. Cotton offered. "It takes some people differently than others. I don't mean to say you haven't got a strong head, but if you happen to have what they call an alcohol idiosyncrasy—"

"Did you dial WE 6-1212?" Mrs. Cotton asked George in the sharp tone usually reserved for her own husband.

He looked a little disturbed. "No, it wasn't quite like that—slightly different somehow. Like WE 6-2121 or maybe . . . anyhow different. I suppose that could explain it."

Mrs. Cotton sat back satisfied. "Of course that explains it. You got the wrong number and some practical joker lived there. That's all."

"Of course," Elinor echoed. "That must be it."

"But it *is* raining," Mr. Cotton pointed out.

"Just a coincidence," his wife said.

The car drew up before the Cottons' apartment house on West Seventy-third. "Why don't you stay with us tonight?" Mrs. Cotton asked. "It's risky driving back to the Island in this weather."

"No, thanks," George answered, before Elinor had a chance to say anything. "We might as well get back tonight."

"We could have gone in for a little while," his wife rebuked him as they drove through the park. "At least until the rain stopped."

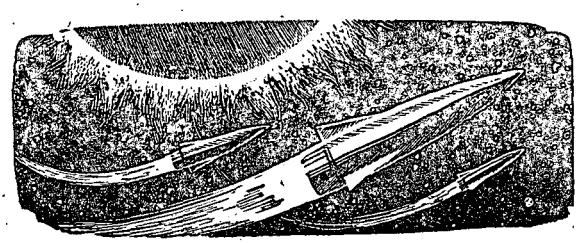
"The rain won't stop."

She laughed, a little too shrilly. "Don't be silly, George. It has to stop sometime."

"Does it?" He looked at her, and she didn't like his expression. "Well, I suppose it will. After forty days and forty nights. That's how long he told me it was going to last. But it won't make any difference to any of us then."

They turned on Fifty-ninth Street and swung east. George would see a psychoanalyst the next day, Elinor decided, no matter what.

They drove across the bridge. She knew it was just her imagination, but the river seemed appreciably higher.



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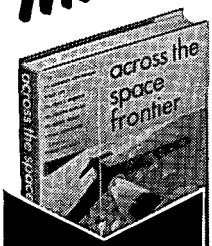

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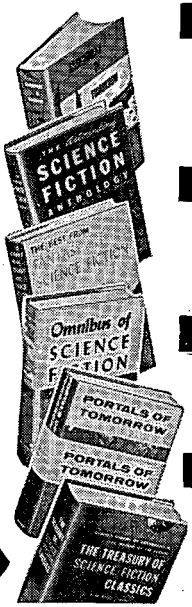

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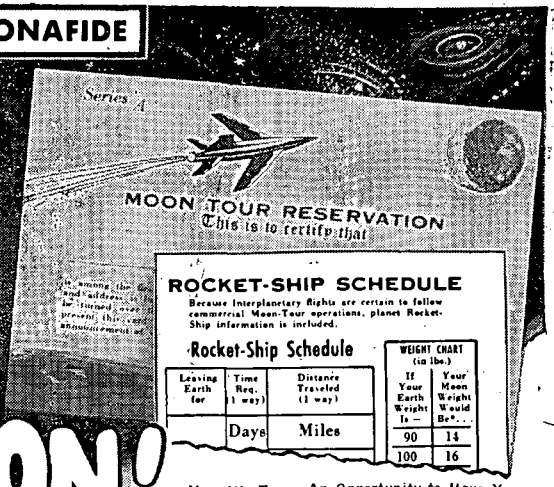

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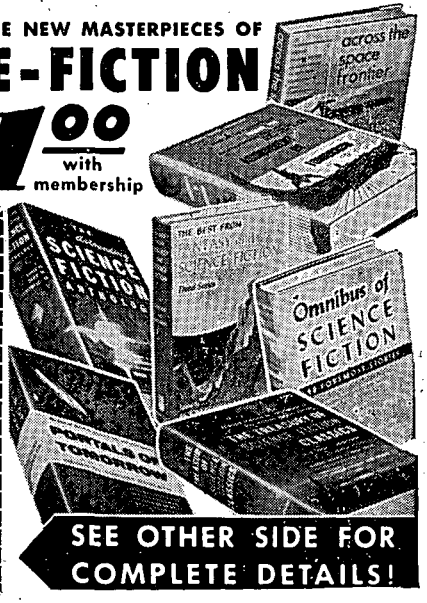

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